Jo Walton

Lifelode

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You probably live in a place not unlike Marakanda, or perhaps you could get there on horseback in a week or so. Marakanda is a university town, and it's because of the diligence of the folk history curators at the Marakanda Academie that you are holding this book in your hands. For the Academie is one of only three places in the world which keep the original account of the events related in this story.

Of course the story is not *about* Marakanda, it's about Applekirk, a ways to the east from Marakanda. If it were about Marakanda there'd probably be a notice that no dragons were injured during the telling of this story. Marakanda is a regular place with regular people leading regular lives, not a place where the art of yeya is practiced in everyday life. Well, to be honest, no dragons were injured in Applekirk either, for the simple fact that there are no dragons in Applekirk. But farther east than Applekirk there are some very peculiar beings and who knows, they might be a little like dragons.

But this story is not about those places farther east than Applekirk—it is about Applekirk, the familes of Applekirk Manor, a visiting Marakandan scholar seeking knowledge about the ancient Marisians who once lived in Applekirk, and one other, someone who left Applekirk years earlier after the Plague, went far east, and came back to tell about it.

So be prepared for a story quite outside the realm of Marakandan experience. You never know but that you might find yourself on a caravan one day going East for an adventure of your own.

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LIFELODE

JO WALTON

Edited by Peter B. Olson

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This is book 584

This one is for David Goldfarb.

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—Jo Walton

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LIFELODE

INTRODUCTION TO *LIFELODE*

I am firmly convinced that Jo Walton can do anything. Think about it: Trollope with Dragons (*Tooth and Claw*); the Mitford Sisters in a Nazi version of *It Can't Happen Here* (the Small Change Trilogy); her own takes on "classic" fantasy (the Sulien books); poems and short stories and blog postings (at `http://bluejo.livejournal.com`) that seem to unreel effortlessly from her brain and keyboard.

And then there's *Lifelode*. Which, in the Walton tradition, is like nothing else she's written before.

It's what one might call "domestic" fantasy, set in a quiet farming community—but it's also about politics, God (in a very literal sense) and religion, sexual mores, the make-up of a family (or interlinked families), and how people change over time (again, in a very literal sense). There is everyday and extraordinary magic, good humor, and lots of food. I've read this novel a few times now, and I invariably punctuate my readings with snacks. (Yes, Jo Walton has made me gain weight.)

Applekirk—the manor house and its community—is the heart of this book, and Walton's Taveth is the heart of Applekirk. Applekirk is Taveth's heart, too, because housewifery is her lifelode. In addition to the daily round of making sure the house and its accounts are in order, that there are enough clothes and linens for everyone, and the meals regularly appear, she also keeps track of a large and complicated family. Not just in the present—in the past and future, as well.

For Taveth has the unique ability to see through time, to see the variously aged selves of the people she knows. She cannot

touch nor talk to them, but it affords her an view of ongoing life that transcends the immediate present. This doesn't mean that the future doesn't surprise her; it means that her friends and family are, in a way, larger than their bodies or the present moment. It makes her more attuned and empathetic; it keeps us guessing about how things will turn out, because we see the what, but not the why.

It's a conscious pleasure seeing the world from Taveth's perspective, and especially refreshing to find a middle-aged female protagonist with a consciously chosen life path, a woman who is clearly smart and thoughtful and grounded, with an active sexual life and a sense of humor. Taveth reminds us of women we know, and she faces some of the same difficulties. The others in her extended family take her lifelode for granted, not always appreciating how vital it is. But when a crisis befalls the family and community of Applekirk, her talents are thrown into high relief. We as readers already understand her true place and gift—but it takes upheaval for everyone else to notice and remember. I'd compare it to how we treat our bodies; we take our health for granted, until we can't. The health of Applekirk—in every sense of the word—relies upon Taveth. And she is an extraordinary housekeeper, because it is her lifelode.

It shouldn't surprise you that this is a feminist novel—in the best sense of the word. It is not utopian; rather, it takes equality for granted. Its world seems possible. The heart of Lifelode's conflict is about both sexes' relationship to marriage and children; there are strong female priests and gods; it grapples with what a woman's role is within a community, but it does not make this seem at all out of the ordinary. It's also humanist, because everyone's opinion is taken seriously, both by the author and the characters. Because of my own lifelode—I edit books for children and young adults—I am especially conscious of how younger characters are handled in adult fiction. It's clear that the author treats them with respect and interest. There are thoughtful discussions between genera-

tions in which an eight-year-old's word has as much weight as an eighty-year-old's. In Walton's world, everyone can (and should!) learn from each other. Knowledge and insight are valuable, no matter the source.

In addition, Lifelode is one of the more subtle books I've ever read. It reminds me very much of Pamela Dean's work, especially *The Dubious Hills*; Dean too writes with loving detail about the dailiness of life, and can turn her invented world upside down with one offhand, nuanced sentence. *Lifelode* also brings to mind Robin McKinley's *Deerskin* in its attention to everyday detail over a period of time. And, as with both Dean and McKinley, when you read Walton it is total immersion, both intellectually and emotionally engaging. There are also echoes of Diana Wynne Jones in the sly humor and treatment of religion. In other words, this is an unusual book, one that stays with you.

I am not allowed to give any more away (believe me, I tried, and it got cut), so I'll stop here. (There is an author-written FAQ at the back, which I haven't seen as of this writing, but I hope that it has recipes!) Oh, and one more thing: Jo doesn't know this (well, she does now), but I have never written an introduction to someone else's book before. I am honored and flattered and also humbled, because I know I haven't done her work justice. You'll see. Just turn the page.

—Sharyn November, December 2008

1

If you go far enough to the west, they say, you come to the lands where people are like statues, going through the day's round the same each day out of pure routine. Contrariwise, if you set off east, people become feyer and stranger, more powerful maybe, but less able to remember who they are from moment to moment, until at last they run together and separate as fast as rainbows on oil and only the gods can keep themselves whole. Between these extremes fall the Marches, where folk have wit and will enough to keep themselves to themselves.

Applekirk lies close to the centre of the Marches, more easterly than some places and more westerly than others. Yeya they have, enough for everyday needs, but not enough to be too much of a distraction from getting on with life. Applekirk is a village of near eight hundred souls, lying in a valley between high wooded hills on both sides of the little river Rassel. It's not much more than a cluster of wood-and-stone houses, a nemet with a spire, whose stable priest follows Liakan, a mill beside the swift-flowing Rassel, and a sturdy old manor house where live the gentry of the place. The weather rolls around in season and the crops and animals grow well, and little do the folk of Applekirk lack, either in the way of tangible or intangible blessings.

Not much comes to disturb them. Now and then a caravan winds through from east or west, pack-horses champing in the road's dust, bringing news and the occasional traveller, sacks of rice and beans and spices from the west, or taking great cones

of wintersweet east to the lands of ever-summer. From time to time a youth will steal off, east or west as their fancy leads them, and perhaps come back in a handful of days or years, changed by their journeying. Season by season different ambule priests come to Applekirk in the time laid down by the Nemet, bringing the worship of the other gods to the villagers one by one. In their proper times, pedlars come through, opening their packs to tempt the folk of Applekirk with gauds from far away. The Rassel flows ever by, singing of rocks and the snow of distant mountains. The winds blow over Applekirk, and sometimes a wind out of the East will bring with it glowing meltemi clouds and odd moods which settle on the folk of Applekirk like a badly fitting cloak. So it is the custom there to keep yeyana hanging in the windows of all rooms, and especially rooms where anyone sleeps. It is an easy enough thing for those aware to shake off most wind-borne moods, but harder when they come in sleep and filter into dreams.

For the most part all goes on well enough. The people of Applekirk spend their lives concerned with their work, they fall in and out of love, endure sickness and recover, and give birth to children and bring them up to become adults. Their stories are all tiny eddies in the great story that is life. Ranal, who farms the manor lands for the lord Ferrand, journeys off west every year in Spring to Margam, where his parents still live, driving with him their sheep, fat and fleecy, and bringing back a thinned flock bare and sheared. Although a month or so may have passed for him, when he returns it seems to Applekirk only a day or so later. Things happen, oh, things happen and are so important that those they happen to feel their hearts must break, yet all will be the same in a hundred years. For a while Applekirk remembers, but in the end everything that happens becomes the past and is forgotten, as it is everywhere.

It is Hodge, years afterward, when he is lord of Applekirk in his father's place, who thinks what happens when Jankin and Hanethe come together needs a different kind of remembrance.

"We should set down an account," he says, remembering Jankin the scholar. "I was six years old, and now I am a man. Tyds was only a baby. After I die nobody will remember."

"Is that so bad?" Taveth asks softly. Time has always parted easily for her and she has never been sure if it is curse or blessing. They are fishing upstream from the manor in a summer dusk, Hodge, Taveth, and Kevan, three rods along the bank hoping for trout.

"Jankin would have thought it was important to keep a record," Hodge insists, setting his back against a willow. He is a sturdy man and young for his dignity, but he bears it naturally.

Taveth looks into the water and smiles at the memory of Jankin. For someone who was here such a short time he leaves a lot of himself in Applekirk. She often catches sight of him at their first meeting, gallant and uncertain at the kitchen door. "Had I known what to expect I'd have hastened my feet on the road," he says, bowing and kissing her hand. This feels so intimate to Taveth, who is entirely unused to gallantry, that she almost takes him to her bed on the spot.

"A record?" she asks vaguely, lost in the heat of memory.

"We found out things nobody knows," Hodge says. "He would have wanted other people who cared to be able to know."

"The house remembers," Taveth says, jerking her rod a little to make the fly dance through the shimmering shadows. "Applekirk knows."

"That's only for us," Kevan says. He is Hodge's unexpected ally in this. Five silver fish sit in leaves in his basket, more than his mother and Hodge have between them. He is forty years old with a black beard shaped like a spade, a lawyer and a judge,

married with a household of his own. "Hodge is right. Things like that don't happen every day. There should be some kind of record. You should write a book."

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Books are strange to Applekirk. There are records, of course, the heavy brass-bound ledgers where Ferrand sets down the rents paid by his tenants on quarter-days, where he writes the stock born and crops gathered as Ranal tells it to him, and where he inscribes the judgements he makes in his courts. There are books too on law, which are dusty when Ferrand finds them as a boy and becomes fascinated. It is Hanethe's father who is a lawyer and brings the books to Applekirk. After he dies nobody opens his books for generations until Ferrand, and after him Kevan. Jankin sees them once when Ferrand takes him into his study and he, interested in everything, reads their titles and thinks they look dull beyond all imagining.

Jankin brings books of a different kind, several in his pack and especially the one he carries always to make notes in. "I need my books," Jankin says, when Taveth uses a word he doesn't know.

"Just raensome," she says, smiling fondly. They are all gathered around the kitchen table, where they have been discussing who will help with the harvest.

Jankin looks up from his plate. "Ransom?" he asks. "What someone pays for their release?"

"Not that kind of raensome," six-year-old Hodge jumps in before the adults can speak. "The other kind. The one that means someone being very characteristically themselves."

"However did the word come to mean that?" Jankin asks. "That's fascinating. I've never heard that before."

"Maybe from someone making an offering of who they are, for you to like?" Chayra suggests. She is making eyes at Jankin. Taveth notices and sighs inwardly a little. Chayra thinks she is

subtle, but to Taveth, whose eyes see Chayra's younger selves within her, she is clearly trying too hard. Chayra is young and pretty but Jankin doesn't pay any attention. He's too fascinated by the new word. "Or maybe the thing that redeems them in your eyes?"

"Raensome," he murmurs. "I need my books."

"We say 'rendsome' in the East to mean someone remaining themselves, holding on to who they are," Hanethe says. "Rendsome, from rendering down to essentials, nothing to do with ransom. That's undoubtedly where the word raensome comes from, someone being their essential selves. Taveth is using it loosely to mean someone doing something she likes, but—"

"I meant just what Hodge said," Taveth interrupts, stung, thinking that Hanethe stings all too often. "Raensome means someone being characteristically themselves, whether here or in the East, where I hear it is harder."

"I must write all this down," Jankin says, reaching into a drawstring pocket hanging from his belt.

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"It doesn't have anything to do with the Marisians," Hodge observes. He is a solid child, strong for six, eager to watch the world and set everything in its place.

"It doesn't need to," Jankin says, pulling out a little inkstone, a pen, and a tiny leather-bound book no bigger than the palm of his hand. "A scholar is a lamp to illuminate the world. While I may be working on illuminating one particular corner of it right now, concerning the Marisians, that doesn't mean I should neglect something else fascinating that gets caught in my beam. Some people might say I should leave it for someone else, but I say they are fools, for someone else might never find it or not until much later. So if I can bring this back to my friend Aldusa, whose lifelode is words, then I will have helped to spread the light of learning. Or for my friend Gerhad, this might be the

information that makes all the difference, because he is writing about the East."

"In Marakanda?" sneers Hanethe.

Marakanda is so far to the West that to the people of Applekirk it seems impossible it should exist, but it is part of the Marches still, and Jankin has come from there to study the relics of the long ago Marisians, or so he tells them. In fact as they have learned already, Jankin is quicksilver and will study anything that comes to his dragon-fly attention. He sees Hanethe's sneer and smiles.

"In Marakanda, yes, in the Academie there," he says. "It might seem strange to you, who has lived in the East, but although Gerhad is in Marakanda he knows a great deal about it because other people who have been there have written it down. Besides…" he hesitates. "If the word is no use to either of them, if it stays in my book for a generation and then someone finds it who needs it, that is still better than neglecting learning when it comes to me." He wets the inkstone with his tisane, dips his pen, and looks up at Hodge again. "When I start working on the Marisians, when the harvest is in, I'll be glad you offered to help even though that isn't your lifelode."

He truly seems to catch light as he speaks, all his shadows are drawn in to his essential self until Taveth would not be surprised to see him glow. She has hardly thought about the work of scholars twice in her life before, but now it seems marvellous to her that the world should contain them. Or at least she thinks, passing behind him as he writes rapidly, marvellous that it should contain Jankin. She is new in love, but the house agrees, remembers Jankin sitting there glowing.

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"A book," Kevan says, as his fishing line goes taut again.

"But who of us could write a book? I could never set everything down in order," Taveth says. She sees so easily through

time that the sequence of any events is hard to set straight. "And where would it begin?"

"It began with Jankin coming," Kevan says. "Or with Hanethe coming. She came first."

Hodge casts a line out into the water and watches it float for a moment in the sunlit shallows before it sinks down into the green depths of the pool. Grown into his man's height, his shoulders broadened, Hodge still has the surety for setting straight he had as a child. He keeps his hands still but turns his head to look at Taveth. "It begins with you. You are the one who sees the ghosts," he says.

"Not ghosts," she objects.

"What are they, then?" Hodge asks.

"Memories?" she says, questioningly, for they are of the past and the future, and how can the future be remembered in the present? "No, shadows," she corrects herself. "Except that shadows are supposed to be dark." Some of them *are* dark. There is a little boy she always sees weeping in the corner of the tower stairs: she does not know who he is nor can she can offer him comfort. He is none of their generation. Is he Ferrand's father, grandfather, or some more remote ancestor? Or is he Hodge's son or grandson? Did he, will he, grow or die? What sorrow causes him to weep ceaselessly? Did his heart mend or break? Taveth cannot know, though his tears touch her heart each time she espies him.

"Whatever you call them you can see them," Hodge says. "You're where it starts, Taveth. You can see the shadows and tell me how to write them down."

Melly too thinks Taveth matters. "Taveth is central," she says, eight years old but very sure.

"Every child thinks their mother is important," Hanethe sneers. Sneering to her is the most natural way of speaking.

Back from the East, her age is an impossibility and Taveth seems hardly more than a servant who has got above herself. Ferrand is lord of Applekirk, Chayra is his wife. By Hanethe's reckoning nobody else matters, not the children (except Melly), not Ranal, who runs the farming side of the estate, and certainly not Taveth, who is no more than Ferrand's sweetmate and housekeeper.

"Taveth *is* important," Melly repeats, making a gesture with her hands.

Hanethe shrugs. After her return she is in some ways more powerful than anyone else in Applekirk, yet in other ways entirely powerless. She cannot contradict Melly again. She needs her too much. She looks away, frowning. In the East her thoughts were faster than lightning, here they crawl so that finding words to speak a sentence is like wading through mud, and then the sentence only comes near to what she wants to say and does not spear through it. She has been away sixty years by the turning seasons of Applekirk, but perhaps fifteen by her own body's count. She is Ferrand's great-grandmother, and still has more black hair than grey. Nobody likes Hanethe (not even herself) for she is not likeable, but everyone has to recognise that she is important.

Taveth by contrast, though most people like her, seems almost invisible—impossible to imagine Applekirk without her, but where is she? Never anywhere important. When the great events happen, Taveth is in the kitchen in a waft of the rich yeasty new-bread or in the garden, shelling peas. Later when the news comes of the invasion she will be bent over the washtub, soaked to the waist, and her first thought will be whether the harvest smocks will be ruined if she leaves them too long in the harsh lye soap she makes every autumn. Seek for her doing yeya and you find her brushing back her cloud of black hair as she makes a yeyana to trap the dust in the great hall, or blowing on her hands to take a hot dish from the oven. As for love, perhaps you might find her with Ranal, or Ferrand,

or Jankin, who are all her loves, but you might just as likely catch her waking from sleep in the hour before dawn to run from a warm bed to comfort a crying baby.

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In the nursery on the second floor of the west tower, Taveth sits singing a baby to sleep. It is not her baby, but Chayra's. Yet Taveth has naturally woken to the crying and risen from bed to come to the side of the cradle. The baby's name is Tydelen, called Tydsey or Tyds, and by certain signs apparent to her family it seems that her father is not Ferrand but Ranal. He is Chayra's sweetmate as Taveth is Ferrand's. Nobody minds Tydsey's parentage, least of all Ferrand. Tydsey is not the heir to Applekirk and the heir, Hodge, is indubitably the child of both his high-born and fully married parents. Hodge is lying asleep in his bed as are all in the manor but Tydsey and Taveth. Tydsey is not wet, not hungry, and quiets for a moment in Taveth's arms, but starts howling again the moment she is set down.

Taveth, who always sees easily through time, rocks the cradle and sings old lullabies seeing other folk sitting in this same room singing to other children. They look to her like shadows if she looks at them straight on, but she has learned long ago to see them plain and sideways. She sees Ferrand's mother, Damasy, singing to the baby that was Ferrand, and others, stretching back and forward through the years. She sings love into the words, and Tydsey, who is cutting a tooth, stops crying and sucks hard on her thumb. Taveth sees a dark-eyed man pacing to and fro rocking a tiny infant, and beside or through him a young woman singing at a cradle whose every movement says she hates what she is doing. That's no way to sing a child to sleep, Taveth thinks, and wonders who she could be. She has never seen her before. Some wet-nurse or foster-mother, she imagines. When she sings to her own babies she feels the community of mothers, linked to their children by the strong

bonds of blood and milk. When she sings to Chayra's she feels the community of all those who have sung to babies not their own. Aunts, grandfathers, sweetmates, nurses, lots of people, Taveth thinks. There are as many men as women in the room with her singing, but she does not see Ferrand or Ranal. Both of them are sound sleepers, though when he is awake Ranal likes babies and often carries Tydsey around with him while he does his farm chores.

The song unreels from her mouth like a skein of thread and Tydsey follows it out and down into sleep. Her eyes close heavily. Taveth keeps singing and thinks that it must be some of the most powerful yeya she knows, to sing to a screaming child and by that alone to lull them into safe sleep. Tydsey's eyelashes are still wet on her cheeks, but she is undoubtedly now a sleeping baby. Taveth finishs her song, to be sure, and tiptoes away in a great crowd of presences of the past and future.

2

"I wanted to keep house." Taveth says it only once, and not loudly, but to the house it resounds as clearly as anything anyone ever says. She says it to Kevan, who is a sulky fourteen, hating the world for being the world. Everyone is angry at fourteen. Ferrand, Damasy, Hodge, Perry, Tydsey, and Hanethe. Hanethe never stops being angry—at least not when she is at Applekirk. Who can guess what happened to her in the East? Even Taveth was angry at fourteen, though at fourteen she is not here, having grown up in Margam. Her fourteen-year-old self can only be glimpsed sometimes, slipping through the boles of the apple trees at dusk. "The orchard is the same," she says, comforted, when she first comes and everything seems strange to her.

"I wanted to keep house," she says, and while it is true, it takes her a little while to adjust to Applekirk, where she is housekeeper. Margam lies a little way to the west. Ferrand finds her there and brings her back with him, along with her husband Ranal and their baby daughter Perry. All her other children are born at Applekirk. In time both she and Applekirk come to feel as if she belongs there just as she belongs in her skin. Is that why she's important, rather than the gift of seeing through time that she passes on through her blood to her daughter Melly?

"Applekirk was waiting, wanted someone to keep it, and I wanted to keep house," Taveth says.

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Nobody challenges her right to keep house, least of all Chayra. Hanethe tries once.

"Why did you come into my kitchen without announcement?" Taveth says, for Hanethe has crept in silently and stands against the wall listening to the others talking.

"Your kitchen?" Hanethe asks, looking rather deliberately at Chayra.

"Taveth's kitchen," Chayra confirms, tossing some damp salad greens into the wooden bowl on top of the radishes. "I help in here from time to time, the children help, the men do, sometimes helpers from the village come in, but it is Taveth's kitchen. We may not do things the way you expect, but you cannot set us against each other like that. You act as if you think Taveth is some hired hand at the mill who thinks herself the miller, but you're wrong, this is her kitchen."

"Then what does it mean that you are Ferrand's wife?" Hanethe asks.

"That I brought a name and a dowry and an alliance into the family, that I have a settlement concerning that, and that while all our children are children of Applekirk, my son Hodge is Ferrand's heir. What else would it mean, you arrogant cat?"

"It should mean that you take precedence over her," Hanethe says quietly. But they are not set against each other as easily as that.

Chayra looks at Hanethe icily. "Do you think I want to keep house? Do you think I don't know how lucky I am that Taveth does?"

The house hears, and remembers. Applekirk wants to be kept and Taveth wants to keep it.

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She is standing in front of the open window, chopping lamb finely in the sunlight. It is before Hanethe, before Jankin. She has just sent little Hodge running for onions and garlic when

Kevan comes into the kitchen. Passionately fourteen and wanting his life to be something it is not, he is beginning to look like his father Ranal. He has the same curly hair and heavy brows. His skin is much lighter, like a richer, darker version of Taveth's own summer-gold. He is small still but Taveth knows he is about to begin a spurt of growth so she is trying to make sure he eats enough. He is half-way between boy and man and terribly difficult to live with.

"Everyone decides their lifelode at twenty-two, right?" he asks, with no preliminaries.

"No." Taveth looks up from the lamb to meet his eyes. Within the sulky fourteen-year-old glowering at her from where he stands poised in the doorway, she can see the loving four-year-old and the curious eight-year-old he had been, as well as the calmly fishing thirty-year-old and the wise sixty-year-old he becomes. What is this about, she wonders? Is he thinking about Perry, who will be home soon? Or is he finally prepared to talk about his future and approaching it in a typically Kevan way? In any case, best to go as slowly as possible and prevent him skittering off in a temper, as Ferrand so often caused him to do. "At twenty-two or thereabouts, when you feel that old, if you've been away, you make a declaration to the lord and the village of what your intention for your lifelode is, how you're going to live. Deciding what it is—discovering it—is a different thing. Some people are born with a lifelode which it would be difficult for them to avoid."

"Like Hodge," Kevan says, nodding.

"Others decide at two, look at Melly. Others make a declaration but they're wrong, they try one thing and then another and don't find their true lifelode until they're older. I was nearly thirty and Perry was already born before I found my true lifelode, the real direction my life was going to take."

"When you met Ferrand?" Kevan is accusatory. He sits down on the wooden chair by the table in the centre of the kitchen and draws in his legs and wraps his arms around them, draw-

ing in his shadows too, so that they all glare at her except the four-year-old, who holds out his arms, and the sixty-year-old who rolls his eyes. With the sun coming through the open door behind him he looks like a small black spider crouching in the middle of a web.

"When I met Ferrand, yes," Taveth says calmly, her hands steady on the knife, dicing the lamb finely, pushing away the insecurities of her own fourteen-year-old self. Kevan's jealousy of Ferrand will only get worse if she reacts to it. "Before that I'd never thought of housekeeping, never taken it seriously. I thought it something dull that old women did."

Kevan doesn't smile. "But you are a woman."

"All the more reason to want to try something more exciting," Taveth says.

"You can see through time. You could have been a seer," Kevan says.

"I wanted to keep house," Taveth replies quietly, yet it echoes.

"But you didn't declare it as your lifelode?" Kevan asks.

"You know I didn't."

"I don't!" Kevan says, angrily. "You expect me to know, to know things that happened before I was born and that I don't care about. How could I know that? It was years ago."

Taveth breathes carefully and tries to speak calmly. "I thought I'd told you before."

"You told me when I was three years old and expect me to remember it forever," Kevan says, flinging his arms out and almost knocking a cone of wintersweet off the table.

"Well, it doesn't matter. When I was twenty-two, I didn't know my lifelode. I thought I wanted to be a poet. But I declared for sheep farming, which is what I was doing then, in the upland country near Margam where your father comes from."

"Then if you hadn't changed your mind we could have stayed there. I could have grown up there." Kevan still sounds accusatory, as so often these days.

"You could, yes." Taveth's hands keep moving, chopping across now, staying even as she keeps her voice even. "That isn't how things worked out, but you could. If you like, you could go up there and visit your grandparents for a season or two and see what life there is like."

"It's all sheep and hills and slow people," Kevan says, dismissing the possibility. "Ranal took me up with him last spring for the shearing, remember?"

Ranal, she notes, not Father. She lets it pass. "Then you wouldn't have wanted to grow up there, would you?"

"I don't know how to tell what my lifelode will be," Kevan says, ignoring her. Taveth looks at him cautiously. Has he come in looking for reassurance? The four-year-old still has his arms outstretched, but it is the fourteen-year-old Kevan of today she needs to deal with.

"You'll work it out. Really. There's plenty of time. Nobody expects you to know what your lifelode is today. Your lifelode is—oh, it's so many different things." The meat is cut finely enough. She pauses, stretches, pushes her hair back from her face. "It's how you survive, how you put food on the table, and beyond that it's what moves your soul. It's not just the lode of your life, the seam you will mine, and not just the direction your life points in, it's also the load you'll carry through it. It isn't something you can just work out in a minute. By twenty-two most people have a good idea what that is. Those of us who don't...well, we manage too."

"I hate all the things I have to do," Keven mumbles. His lip quavers and an eight-year-old shadow is frankly in tears.

Taveth pretends not to notice, letting him keep his pride. She looks around the room for inspiration, not finding any. There is a fire in the range heating the ovens for the daymeal she will make. On the table sits a bowl of peas. Dried herbs and flowers hang from the ceiling among the hams and the scanty remains of last year's smoked sausages. Along the walls are sacks and jars, beans, peas, vegetables, jams, and summersweet. Soon

it will be autumn and the shelves will groan beneath the weight of good things she will store to see them through to another spring. She takes up her copper pan and sets it on the fire, putting the first two handfuls of the diced lamb into it to brown. She looks back at her son. "You should try doing lots of different things. You're bound to find something you like, or at least something that will support you," she suggests.

"There aren't all that many things to try in Applekirk."

"It isn't the only place in the Marches," Taveth says, knowing from his tone that they are drawing near to what he really wants to say, feeling a pang and quenching it.

"Hilden's going to Darragon to study," Kevan says neutrally, only his present self showing.

"I thought you said when school finished that you were tired of study?" Taveth reaches up for some thyme and begins to crumble it into the cooking meat, mostly to hide her face.

"Hilden says they study different things. The stars and the properties of rock and the way things work, not just boring texts from a million years ago. Honestly, there hasn't been anything new in school since I learned to read and figure. I've read half the books in the schoolhouse and I don't care about the other half. Timot doesn't even know any more than I do. But I'd like to learn about real things."

"The stars? Rocks? Those are real things?" This is before Jankin, and practical Taveth can't help being sceptical. She takes out her big blue dish, the one Chayra makes the first year she is married to Ferrand. It has lopsided white patterns set on the sides which make Chayra wince now, but Taveth always likes it, seeing it as a pledge to the family. She tips the cooked meat from the copper pan into the dish and puts another two handfuls into it. She has sent Hodge for onions, and she wonders why he is taking so long.

"Those are real, yes, there's something new to know about them, something I don't know and nobody here knows." The shadow of the man he will become is gesturing with his hands

enthusiastically, almost sweeping up the fourteen-year-old into himself.

"I thought Lowis wanted Hilden to be a lawyer," Taveth says, stirring the lamb and playing for time.

"That's what I thought too, but Hilden says it's possible to study law and natural philosophy both, and Lowis is happy with that. Lowis is a good father, not always trying to catch Hilden by the heel, Hilden says."

Law, Taveth thinks, would be useful. A lawyer was an asset to any family. "Are you and Hilden lovers?" she asks, as carefully as she has for the last six months avoided asking.

Kevan looks down. His shadows are clouded. "Sure," he says, with a painful nonchalence. "That's nothing to do with anything."

Hodge comes running into the kitchen before Taveth can echo Kevan's "Sure" sarcastically. He has onions and garlic, freshly pulled from the earth and rinsed in the stream, which must be what has taken him so long.

"How lovely, they're clean," Taveth says, taking them from him and beginning to chop them. "Now I need well water."

"Will you help, Kev?" Hodge asks. Hodge at six can just manage the well for himself, but with help it is easier for anyone.

Kevan pulls himself out of the chair. He likes Hodge and Melly. He likes being the big brother, being on the adult side of the child/adult divide for once. He glances knowingly at the pitchers set under the counter, all of them touched with yeya to keep sweet, but says nothing as he leaves with Hodge. If he guesses that his mother can think more clearly out of his presence, he has the sense not to draw attention to it. He really is growing up, Taveth thinks, for she recognises the signs, but it is so difficult when so much of him is still a child.

Taveth tips the last of the cooked meat in with the rest and sets the chopped onions and the garlic on the fire in their place, trying to see it all clearly. She had not thought Kevan wanted

more education. He hadn't done that well at school. She isn't sure they'd even accept him at Darragon. Most difficult would be the cost.

She stirs the onions and garlic over the heat and her eyes smart. As she does every time, she brushes them with the back of her hand and wishes she knew some yeya that would prevent the watering. She empties the pan on top of the meat and adds a handful of oats to thicken it. She takes a pinch of salt from the precious glass jar, and sniffs at the meat, considering pepper. It isn't so much the expense, but how long it will be before she can buy any more. There are no pedlars due from the west until autumn. She should have written to Perry to bring some home with her, as it would certainly be for sale in the shops in Belvede. She grinds a little pepper in all the same. She is half-expecting Chayra to bring her lover Gislain with her for dinner. Gislain is an ambule priest of Diktin, and from a rich family. If she comes she would find the food flavourless without pepper.

Taveth can hear the boys in the garden, teasing each other. It would do Kevan good to be away from home for a year or two, she thinks. He is most human with the little ones. He needs to get some growing done away from people who have known him all his life and still see him as a child. The relationship with Hilden might or might not be important. Very few people make lasting bonds as teens—she and Ranal were unusual and even they had been eighteen, not fourteen. She knows she is going to have to let Kevan go. She had thought it had been hard with Perry, but this is no easier. She knows she'll have to go through this time after time as each child grows up, right down to Chayra's little Tydsey, who isn't even talking yet.

When the children come back in carrying the water, she is ready for it and pours it in. "Quickly Hodge, get me some basil," she says. "Just three or four leaves of fresh basil, from the herb garden."

He rushs off again full of six-year-old self-importance, and her heart melts to see him.

"He's getting to be a real help," Kevan says.

"You were the same at his age," Taveth says fondly, remembering. "Just as well he likes it, because Melly finds kitchen work really dull."

"She's never wanted anything except playing about with yeya," Kevan says. "She'll go off east and not come back, you know."

Taveth looks at him and finds some challenge in his eyes but also an attempt to be civilized and speak about the children like an adult. "I think we've all recognized that she'll want to go east to learn yeya that she can't learn here," she says, stirring. "She'll go when it's time and may come back in time, though I have not seen it. It'll be hard for us all. Meanwhile, you want to go west to Darragon, to study and then come home again?" She pauses, and he nods cautiously. "Then I need to talk to the others. Ferrand will have to pay for it and that means you need to be giving something back to Applekirk, which means studying law as well as unnatural philosophy or whatever it is."

"Law's so dull," he protests half-heartedly.

"You pay for it yourself, you can choose what you want," Taveth says. "If it's Applekirk money, you have to give back. And it will be Applekirk money, and Ferrand will have to agree."

"Father—"

"Ranal and I don't have the sort of wealth it would take to send you to Darragon. Don't be ridiculous. If you go, you'll be going as a son of Applekirk and you will owe us all a return on that." The meat is ready to go into the oven, as soon as she has the basil. She puts the pan on top of the oven to begin to warm.

"I could work my own way through?" he suggests tentatively.

"It would take you ten years, and then what would you do? But if you're that set against law, stay at home another year and save your wages. That would pay for a year at Darragon, and I'd see what I could manage then to go with it."

"I'm not that set against law," Kevan says, his face falling a long way at the thought of staying. "I could study law as well."

"And you'll work for the family when we need law?" She looks at him sharply.

"Law isn't my lifelode, mother. I'm sure it's not." His older selves are much less sure, one of them even shaking his head and smiling ruefully.

"It may be a way to feed yourself while you find out what your lifelode is. People are always taking each other to court, people always need a lawyer. No lawyer ever starves. It may help you, even if it isn't your lifelode."

"Maybe," he says, frowning.

"Let me talk to Ferrand," Taveth says.

"I could ask him," Kevan offers. His shadow selves shrink away, and everything in his tone and posture shows his reluctance.

Hodge comes in panting, clutching some basil. "There wasn't much," he says.

Taveth feels a pang for her basil plants and suppresses it. She rubs the leaves, releasing the rich wholesome scent to fill the kitchen, then drops them into the dish, which is almost full.

"I'll ask him," she says to Kevan, over Hodge's head. "You've hardly been civil to him for the last year, after being so fond of him before. He'll understand." She hopes he will understand. She breathes on her hands and waves them to protect them from heat, then opens the oven and sets the blue dish down inside. The blast of hot air feels like the breath of a dragon. She closes the door quickly, it is far too hot a day to bear having it open for long.

She turns to Hodge. "Now you rub garlic and oil into the bread, and then there's nothing to do until it's time to cook the peas," she says. "It needs to cook for half an hour."

Hodge automatically glances at the clepsie, dripping in the corner of the kitchen counting the time.

Taveth begins to crush the rest of the garlic, ready to hand to Hodge.

"I wasn't rude on purpose," Kevan mutters.

"To father?" Hodge asks, turning as he climbs onto the chair to reach the oil.

"To Ferrand, yes. I sometimes feel we have too many people in this family," Kevan says.

"There are plenty of families with more than four adults," Taveth says calmly, while she catches back her own impatience and desire to snap at him, holding it in check like a small dog on a choke chain. She frowns at Kevan behind Hodge's back, and gestures towards him. Children accept their family the way it is. Criticising it is for older people, and she didn't want to upset Hodge. "Nobody really sets out to fall in love with anyone, we were all lucky enough to make a stable family. I feel very privileged, very fortunate, to have fallen in love with two such splendid people as Ranal and Ferrand, and also that when Ferrand married he brought Chayra here."

"I suppose we could have more people," Kevan says, frowning, though some of his older selves are laughing.

"We're not planning to extend the family, don't worry," Taveth says. "We're stable. We may have lovers outside, but we're all happy to stay as we are."

"You don't," Hodge says.

Taveth stops crushing garlic and stares at him. "I don't—well, you see, I don't fall in love very often. Indeed, I'm so happy as I am, I don't suppose it's very likely that I'll ever fall in love again."

"It never rains, but it pours," Hodge quotes solemnly.

Taveth laughs, but within a fortnight Jankin is among them and she has fallen very far in love indeed. It brings as much pain as joy, but it is the joy she remembers.

3

They all fall in love. Even Perry, who has no use for sex, falls in love from time to time. Chayra falls in love most often, Hodge least. Taveth falls in love with Ranal, away in Margam when they are very young. Their love lasts, but by the time they come to Applekirk it is settled, married love, a layer of bedrock that the family rests on for years. When Ranal falls in love with Chayra, Taveth is pleased. "Frubbled to see you together," she says, using an old Margam word, frubbly, meaning the opposite of envy. Chayra comes to love Ranal, and Ferrand, but she saves her falling in love for outside the family. She is a girl when she comes to them, and they are all adults. They are ready to love her but she is prickly and defensive. She stands on her status, she is the daughter of a lord and the wife of one. She knows it is Taveth that Ferrand loves. After some awkwardness, Taveth offers to yield up the housekeeping to her, but there she is certain.

"No. I have my own lifelode," she says. "Ferrand knows."

Finding a wife who has her own lifelode among the small selection of available women of the right age and status to marry him is not the least of the achievements of Ferrand's life. Chayra is a potter, a skilled one. Her work is her life, and they all profit by that. In time she comes to fit into the family as if there had been a space there in her shape. All the same she is romantic in a way none of the rest of them are, and continually falling in love. In Jankin's time she is in love with Gislain, and then with Jankin, of course.

Chayra is the fairest of them all, with pale skin and light hair, hair the colour of clover honey, usually tied neatly behind her in

a single long braid. Only her big eyes are dark. She is tall, but very slim and fine-boned. All this conspires to give her a deceptive appearance of fragility. In fact the pottery makes her arms powerful and she loves to dance, which makes her legs strong and her body supple all over. She can beat Taveth and Ferrand every time at arm-wrestling, and gives even Ranal, whose arms are strong from lifting sheep and mattocks, an even match. She fights, at need, with a foil, and during the siege kills one warrior with it and wounds another. Big Ranal vomits behind the rhododendrons after the fight, but little Chayra just goes on to the next thing. Her fragility is all illusion.

Taveth shuts the larder door and goes on into the kitchen. She sets down a waxy cloth on the kitchen table. She nods to the garden door, which opens for her. She takes a twist of dust from her smock and shakes it free. It billows up in a cloud and makes her cough. As she is recovering, Chayra comes up the garden path, swinging her hat from her hand. She is barefoot and wearing a drifting white dress made out of the linen Taveth bought at the Spring fair, intending it to make underclothes for all them for next winter. "You do look pretty," Taveth says. "When did you make that?"

Chayra looks down at herself, smiling, though a wisp of a seventeen-year-old self is frowning in dissatisfaction. "Ranal and I made it up a few days ago," she says. "I know I should have asked you about the cloth, but it felt so cool and there was plenty of it."

"You should have asked, you're as bad as the children. Ask next time, eh? But as long as there's enough left for cheese there's no harm done. I can get more before I need it because a caravan will be through soon. You know, I'm not sure I've ever seen you wear undyed white before, but it suits you." Taveth would have imagined that white would make pale Chayra look wan, but in fact it brings out the delicate apricot colour of her skin.

"Thank you," Chayra says, looking a little taken aback.

Taveth steps back into the kitchen and Chayra follows her. "Did you have a good time with Gislain?" she asks.

Chayra gives a contented little sigh.

Chayra loves Gislain and her pretty ways, but she is always a burden to the children. None of them like her. Kevan calls her 'Ghastly Gislain'.

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One time Hodge repeats it without discretion. Ferrand and Hodge are helping Taveth shell peas in the garden. Ferrand asks if they know where Chayra is.

"With Ghastly Gislain," Hodge says immediately.

"She is out with Gislain," Taveth confirms. "But don't call her that, Hodge. It's unkind. They're at that adorable stage where they're holding hands and telling each other their life stories."

Ferrand laughs.

"Eeew," Hodge says. "Will Ghast—will she be here for daymeal?"

"I don't know," Taveth says. "We've shelled enough peas. But she may have to work. If she is here, you're to be polite to her and not call her that name."

"She's so soppy. I don't know what Mother sees in her."

Taveth shifts the bowl, and avoids saying that it might have been Gislain's 'soppiness' that was precisely what attracts Chayra to her. Chayra's romantic streak isn't often indulged at home.

"Grown ups see things in other grown ups that children don't see," Ferrand says. "Besides, what's wrong with a bit of being soppy? Everyone's a bit soppy now and then. You may think it's silly now, but I assure you there'll come a time when you'll want to do just this." He takes the bowl of peas firmly from Taveth's grasp and sets it down carefully on the step. Then he puts his hands on Taveth's waist and kisses

her on the lips. She leans towards him and kisses him back enthusiastically.

Hodge regards them evenly, with a hint of indulgence. "That's different. That's just being friendly like grown ups," he says. "Gislain is always going on about it. When Mother and Gislain and Melly and I went to the fair she never stopped being soppy. She was even soppy about the animals, not kissing them, of course, but saying how sad it was they all had to die. I asked her what we'd eat if we didn't eat them, and she just shrugged."

"There are people who don't eat meat," Ferrand says, keeping his arm comfortably around Taveth's waist. "Like a year long Fast."

"Well, Gislain isn't one of them, she was eating the duck confits as cheerfully as anyone later," Hodge says.

"Do be polite if she comes here," Taveth says. "It'll upset Chayra if she thinks you don't like her lover."

"I'm always polite," Hodge says, and Taveth sees peeping out for the first time the sulky teen he will become.

"I've found it a good rule when I meet partners of my partners who I don't necessarily like immediately, or have anything in common with, to talk to them about their lifelode," Ferrand says. "It's neutral ground and something they care about, and they often feel more at ease and get quite sensible. People will talk about their work far more easily than they'll talk about anything else, generally, and they know something about it, so sometimes I learn something."

"I'll try it," Hodge says.

Taveth disentangles herself from her sweetmate and picks up the bowl of peas. "If I don't get started on daymeal soon there won't be any for you sages to converse over," she says. "Are you two going to help, or do you have things to do?"

"I'll keep helping," Hodge says. "I'll take these pods down to the compost and come back." He sets off at a run, spilling pods behind him.

"I'd love to help, but I need to write some letters," Ferrand says. "Are you busy later?"

"Tonight?" Taveth grins. "I'll check with Ranal."

He kisses her again. "You're just so irresistible when you're working."

"In my faded old smock with my hair straggling down," Taveth mocks.

"I don't see that, but my beautiful Taveth, intent upon her lifelode," Ferrand says.

Taveth snuggles up closer. "I'll definitely try to have some time later," she says. She remembers without regret a time when she and Ferrand were first together, when they would have lain down among the peas and forgotten the daymeal.

Hodge comes trudging back up the garden, bending to pick up the spilt pods. "I think I did the right thing saying that about partners," Ferrand says quietly.

"I think it was perfect. It made him like one of the grown ups, with a grown up way to behave if he doesn't like someone." Taveth pushes her hair back with one hand. "Just for a second there I saw him as a sulky fourteen—one Kevan is more than enough."

"It's a difficult gift you have," Ferrand says. "I'm glad I only see one of anyone."

"I'm used to it," Taveth says. "With adults it isn't so insistent, it's just the occasional glimpse into who they were or will be. But with children as they change, all their selves are there at once sometimes." Hodge is almost back to them. Taveth raises her voice. "Hey, Hodge? Will you fetch some lamb from the cold store? Enough for all of us, and Gislain if she comes—that's ten."

"Lamb and peas!" Hodge shouts, and runs off kicking the scattered pods, his arms outspread, and they smile to watch him go.

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Hodge falls in love only once, when he is fifteen, with Latris Pedmark, who is a year older than he is. He marries her, has children by her, and neither of them ever (so far as anyone knows) looks at anyone else. This is accounted a miracle of Agdisdis, goddess of marriage, and becomes a proverb all over the Marches.

Taveth falls in love three times. The most disruptive is when she meets Ferrand and rearranges her whole life and Ranal's to be with him. Then it is fifteen years before she falls in love again, when Jankin comes.

The kitchen door bursts open and Hodge almost falls inside, dragging a stranger behind him. "He's come, Taveth!" Hodge says. "And he says the Marisians were here for sure!"

The stranger is young, male, and comely enough to eat, as the saying goes. Despite the heat of the day he manages to look cool in dark leather, which leaves little about the shape of his very shapely body to the imagination. His skin is the colour of pale leather, and is visible only at hands, face, and neck—Taveth's gaze lingers for a moment at the open neck of his dark leather suit. He has left the top of the lacing undone, and she itches to unlace it a little more. His hair, which is twisted up on top of his head in an awkward bun, is chestnut coloured, streaked here and there with gold. His beard is darker. Taveth feels her skin heat as she meets his eyes and sees he is looking at her with a similarly cheerful appreciation. "I'm Jankin of Marakanda," he says, spreading his hands and bowing in what she takes for Western courtesy. He had only one shadow, a younger self, who does not bow but whose eyes rest on Taveth with if anything an even deeper admiration.

"I'm Taveth," she says, flustered. "I keep the house here."

Jankin steps forward and takes her hand, then bends over it and kisses it. It feels as if his lips burn a new channel in her nerves. She is swept through by the familiar warming ache of desire, so strongly that her legs hardly hold her up. Her skin becomes sensitive and her whole body seems to centre on the

heated well between her legs. She feels as if she could melt and lie in a pool on the kitchen floor. "My lady Taveth," Jankin says, straightening again and looking her in the eyes. There is an understanding smile deep in his. He could hardly be twenty-five, she thought, how had he become so knowing?

"I'm not anyone's lady," Taveth says, snatching her hand back. He lets go as soon as she begins to move—there is no resistance from him—it is her own desire she is struggling against. She takes a step backward and feels the edge of the table behind her. She tries to regain her composure. "We're none of us titled folk here, though we call Ferrand our lord. You'll be the scholar who wrote to him? We've been anticipating your arrival."

"Had I known what to expect I'd have hastened my feet on the road," Jankin says. His shadow spreads his hands and grins as if apologising for the hyperbole.

Taveth turns, bewildered, and busies herself finding bread, ordinary unleavened bread, and sprinkling it with salt and rosemary. At least this is a simple blessing. "Blessings and peace in the name of wandering Kilen; be welcome to Applekirk, Jankin of Marakanda."

"Blessings and peace to you and all your kin, in the name of Kilen and of Ganipay," Jankin replies. A shadow crosses his face as he names the gods. Taveth has never heard of Ganipay, who is a local stream-god revered only in Marakanda, but she smiles and gives him the bread, which he takes and eats quite reverently. Hodge, without being asked, brings cool ale in one of Chayra's cups. Jankin sips and then takes a deep draught. "That's good ale—your own brewing?" he asks.

"Yes, that's last autumn's ale," Taveth says proudly.

"He's come about the Marisians," Hodge says, excited. It has been all he can do to wait until the ritual greeting is over before bursting out with it. "I was coming up from the harvesting to help you like I said I was going to, and there he was looking at the gate. He says some of it is Marisian stone."

"How fascinating," Taveth says blankly.

Jankin laughs, and takes another draught of the ale. "It was a thousand years ago. There's no reason any of you would have heard of them."

"A Western Empire?" Taveth ventures, admiring the way his beard curls.

"No, if I'm right, and I'm nearly sure I am, they reached as far as Applekirk though it was almost as far East as they came," Jankin says enthusiastically.

"But Maris is far to the West," Taveth says, gesturing vaguely. "How could they have controlled such a vast area?"

"Oh, that's one of the most interesting things," Jankin says. "They started as a loose confederation of independent provinces, electing an Emperor and calling themselves an Empire, but without any central control. And they kept expanding, not really being much more than a titular Empire. They had no more to keep them together than the nominal Emperor, one standard of weights and measures, and free trade. Then, after six hundred years or so, what we call the Marisian miracle happened—Alayan the Great suddenly exercised a strong central control, and they became a real political unit and had a flowering of art and music and architecture for three generations, a hundred years in Maris, and longer out on the eastern borders. Then very rapidly, it all fell apart as if the gods were punishing them for hubris, or as if it had all been a game, and they'd fulfilled some arbitrary victory condition and the pieces were being tidied away."

"How strange," Taveth says, fascinated by the way his face changes when he is intent on this ancient history. "And nobody knows what caused the miracle or the downfall?"

"There are a lot of theories," Jankin says, and catches himself as he is about to begin. "I don't want to bore you."

"You're not even slightly boring," she assures him, though Hodge is looking impatient.

"Tell her about the stones!" he says.

Jankin smiles down at him sympathetically. "The stones in the lower part of the gateway seem to be Marisian. So I really think I have proof they were here."

"Then your journey was worthwhile," Taveth says.

"Lady, any journey with you at the end would be worthwhile though it were across the wastes and had no other purpose," he replies.

Hodge blows air loudly between his lips. "You sound like Ghastly Gislain," he says.

Jankin laughs. "And who is Gislain?"

"She's my mother's sweetheart, and she talks rot like that all the time," Hodge says.

"Gislain is our ambule priest of Diktin," Taveth says, as sternly as she can. "And Hodge, I've told you, it's a grown-up thing. And in this case, it's Western politeness, to which you should pay attention in case you ever go into the Westmarch."

"Calva preserve me from lovers who expect that kind of thing," Hodge says, and Taveth is amazed to see all his shadows nod in unison.

Jankin laughs. "What are you, seven, eight years old?" he asks. "The day will come all the same when you want something to say when you meet a beautiful woman. Will you give her unwrapped truth? Will you say that since you saw her your pulse has raced and your plough refused to lie quiet in your breeches? Will you say that and then add that you wish you might come to know her better?" To Taveth's intense amusement, Jankin's younger self was nodding emphatically, as if to say it was what one should say. "No," Jankin goes on, oblivious, "Wrap it around with extravagance, so that she may take it as common politeness unless she chooses to respond."

"And are you expecting Taveth to respond?" Hodge asks.

Taveth feels her cheeks heating again, from quite a different cause. She cannot bear to look at Jankin, so she looks at Hodge, who looks, as ever, like a six-year-old who wants everything to fit into the right box. It is far too late to stop him.

"Are you asking me my intentions? You're quite the youngest person ever to do so," Jankin says, smiling easily down at the child. "Well, if she has a husband and a sweetheart already she may not have time for me, but I always live in hope when I see anyone so lovely," he finishes, and turns back to Taveth, smiling.

"I need to talk to my husband," Taveth says, perturbed, not on account of her agreement with Ranal, but because they had moved so far so fast without any time to think. She has often been attracted to people at first sight, but never begun to negotiate a relationship with someone she didn't know well. "You're still a stranger," she says.

"Time will mend that," Jankin says, though he also seems disconcerted. He turns to Hodge. "See, your straight dealing has driven us directly to confusion, where my common politeness might have made all smooth before us."

"I think it's nonsense, and much better to say what you mean," Hodge says. "I think you're much more interesting when you talk about the Marisians and I think Father will agree."

"Take Jankin to meet your father," Taveth says, leaping on this thought with relief. She wants some time alone to catch up with herself. "You've caught us harvesting, so everyone is down in the barley field, but Ferrand will want to greet you as soon as he can."

"You can tell him about the wall," Hodge urges.

"Would it be acceptable for me to leave my pack?" Jankin asks.

"Of course. You can leave it—" Taveth hesitates, arrangements chasing each other through her head. Hanethe has Chayra's room, which is always the best guest room and easiest to give up since Chayra almost never sleeps in it, preferring to spend her nights with Ranal or Ferrand. When he was just a stranger from Marakanda, before she met him, Taveth intended to make up a bed for Jankin in the sewing room, but it is above the larder in the oldest part of the house. This means there are

no corridors. It is a throughfare at all hours unless everyone remembers to go around, which the children never do. At the top of the east tower, Peronel's room is empty, for Perry has not yet returned from Belvede, but she might be home any day. Still it is clearly the best place to put Jankin if he needs privacy, even if it is immediately above Kevan's room.

Taveth is used to considering such things for everyone else's convenience, but she so rarely sleeps out of her own comfortable room in the west tower that even contemplating visiting Jankin in Perry's room gives her an unaccustomed thrill.

"Leave your bag here for the moment until I arrange where to put you," she says.

Jankin bows again. "I shall leave it to stand for me until we meet again," he says. Hodge rolls his eyes and leads the way out.

"Tell me about the Marisian measures," he says as Jankin follows him.

Taveth goes after them as far as the doorway and watches them walk down the path. The back view of Jankin is just as tantalisingly comely as the front view. She puts a hand on his pack, which is ordinary leather. She isn't sure if she wants to laugh or let her tongue hang out like a dog's. She thinks she hasn't felt like this since she was eighteen years old and wondering what this lust could be that moved in her so differently from the way people talked about it. Even when she meets Ferrand, who is also a stranger and who sees past what everyone else failed to see in her, she doesn't feel so shaken. She remembers when she and Ferrand were first together, but cannot remember her knees ever feeling this weak. On the whole, laughing at herself seems a sensible choice. She will certainly have to speak with Ranal, and with Ferrand as well. She is surprised at herself, but pleased too. It can only be for a little time, she knows. He will

be leaving so it won't complicate her life for long. He can be a little treat for her, an indulgence for her body, the way the children like to suck on wintersweet cones. She smiles again and goes up to put flowers in Perry's room right away.

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When she loves Jankin, she becomes continually aware of him, even when he does nothing but sit quietly. She watches to see what shadows he has showing. If he is in the room, then she becomes conscious that there are fine hairs on the back of his hand, limned by the sunlight. If he is not, then the room seems somehow vacant and uninteresting. She wishes he had come at a time without crisis, when she could have had time to enjoy him without worry. She laughs at herself as she swings another pot of porridge away from the fire, aware how few times are without crisis, whether it be a grandmother returned from the gods, a crop failure, or a child with a fever.

4

"Maybe we should start with Hanethe coming back," Kevan says. He puts down his fishing rod, but Taveth keeps hers in her hand and stares out over the eddies on the green water to where her fly bobs. Time, she knows, is an illusion. Things seem to happen one after another, but when you look back they all happened at once and what seemed at the time to be part of one story was part of another, as with the wooden puzzles Tydsey loves as a nine-year-old, where a piece that seemed like part of the sky is turned around and becomes half a boat and an old man's hand.

"Maybe it all started with Hanethe going away," she answers after a little while.

"The first time you mean? Have you seen that?" Hodge asks, surprised.

"The house doesn't really remember. I don't think she remembered herself."

But she does. It's what makes coming back so difficult. She leaves the day her son Yann turns twenty-two and takes up the lordship as his lifelode. She leaves with her back stiff and her jaw set, twenty-three years later than she wanted to leave. Staying is all cold duty and sharp pain. There are times when her only comfort is taking a knife to her flesh for the pleasure of seeing the blood well up and knowing something is real and in her control. Leaving is like cold water in a parched throat. She walks off into the east and does not look back.

"Did she ever tell you why she left?" Hodge asks. "She was lord of the manor, she wouldn't just leave, would she? Not even

Hanethe would do that." Hodge, like his father, is a diligent lord and cannot imagine abandoning Applekirk.

Taveth shakes her head, the dark cloud of her hair streaked here and there with silver now. "She never said anything about it to me."

It is Melly Hanethe tells.

The first morning Hanethe wakes back at Applekirk, after her mixed reception of the night before, she lies unmoving on the bed. Thinking is easier than it was, though it still has an underwater slowness. Either it has lightened up a bit or she is getting used to being so far west, which shouldn't make her want to cry but does. She lies still under the stiff linen sheet and stares up at the cracks in the plaster between the beams. There is a lighter patch with dark stains around it that speaks of a leak and repairs. She lived here, she reminds herself, she lived here for thirty-seven years. It was only that she never meant to come back. She almost carries on walking, the day before, almost keeps heading west towards the lands where there was no thought at all, but how could she have lived there? Her lifelode is yeya, it would be little enough use to her in the Marches and none in the West. Her purse is very light indeed. Home, she thinks, leaving the East in a precipitate flight. She can remember thinking it. She cannot remember, or imagine, what she thought she would do here. Yet here she must stay, here or somewhere worse. The East is barred to her henceforth. She has little enough desire to suffer the vengeance that the goddess Agdisdis would extract there.

She lies flat on her back, her arms outside the covers. They are wool. Of course they are—she remembers sleeping under wool. It is, however she counts it, most of her life. Some things, she supposes, are just easier to forget. She will have to speak to Ferrand today, to explain herself. She knows she should get

up, sit upright, turn herself, and put her feet on the mat. She knows the commands her body needs to act upon, but can not bring herself to send them—it is all too much effort. Maybe she could lie here forever staring up at the patched and cracking plaster until at last it falls and mummifies her.

The door opens with a creak and Melly peeps in, eight years old, all eyes and legs and wild flying hair. "Are you awake, Granny Hanethe?" she asks.

No, she couldn't lie here forever, they wouldn't forget about her. "I'm awake," she says, and sits up, swinging herself around, easily, smoothly, with no problem at all. "Did your mother send you to ask?"

"Yes, she sent me to see if you were awake, without disturbing you. I didn't disturb you, did I? You were awake already. Why don't you wear any clothes in bed?"

"I've never liked to," Hanethe says, looking down at her trim body with satisfaction. "My grandmother made me when I was a child, but I never have again since I was old enough to decide for myself."

"I don't like to either," Melibee says, confidentially. "Mother says I'll get cold in winter if I don't. Do you get cold in winter?"

"I know how to keep myself warm," Hanethe says, reaching for her clothes.

"With yeya?" Melly holds the door and rocks to and fro as it swings, but she looks Hanethe full in the eyes the whole time. It almost makes Hanethe dizzy.

"With one of the yeyan arts, yes. Do you know yeya?"

Melly stops swinging, lets go of the door, and takes a step into the room. "I know some and I'm terribly good at it, but I want to know more. I want to go East and work with it."

Hanethe stops, one stocking on and the other in her hand. She can hardly speak, for memory and empathy are choking her. "I hope nothing prevents you," she says, her wish as fervent as a prayer.

"Nothing can," Melibee says in the terrible confidence of childhood.

"I thought that, but the Plague stopped me," Hanethe confides.

"It didn't stop you very much, because here you are come back," Melly says, with an eight-year-old's inexorable logic.

"I had to be lord of the manor, and I had to provide an heir, and I had to wait until the heir grew up before I could go." Hanethe says. "I was thirty-seven years old. How old are you?"

"Eight," Melly says, her voice very small.

"Five times as long as you've been alive, near enough—four times as long from the age you are now." And for Hanethe every day of it is harder than the day before, with work to be done in bitter duty that stands between her and her lifelode. Never again, she thinks when she leaves, never again will she be stopped like that. Yet here she is in Applekirk, dressing herself.

"Hodge is the heir," Melly says. "Hodge will make a good lord of the manor. Hodge is born in wedlock and sealed to the land. Applekirk is his lifelode, not mine."

"And if a plague took him?"

The child shrugs elaborately. "What is a plague?"

It has been three generations, Hanethe reminds herself—four to the child—but surely they couldn't have forgotten? She remembers the plague year, burying her mother and father with hardly the strength to scrape the earth over them, already sick herself. She wakes after the sickness left her to find her brothers and sisters all dead too, and Granny Melibee, whose name this child bears, telling her there were only the three of them left of all the household. Maybe they thought it too terrible to tell to children. A mistake, she thinks, to be so over-protective. It keeps them safe and childlike, yes, but it makes them more foolish than they need to be, and over-confident. It is so hard after they do find out, eventually, the later the worse.

"A sickness," Hanethe says. "A sickness that kills. What if it came again or if there was some accident and Hodge died, and you had to stay as I did?"

Melly waves her hands, frowns, opens her mouth to speak, and thinks better of it. She stares at Hanethe for a moment. Hanethe pulls her second stocking on. "Have you come back to teach me?" the child asks after a moment. All children are self-centred, and Melly, who sees through the patterns of time, is worse than most.

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Nobody sobs for Hanethe when she leaves, either time. The first time her son Yann, newly come to his manhood and his lordship, stands watching her, dry-eyed. The second time they are all there, but only Hodge is watching—there is no time to speak and nobody cries.

Taveth weeps for Perry and for Kevan. She and Chayra weep together for Tydsey. Hanethe, who goes so far east, is away for longest. Kevan, who goes west to Darragon, the shortest.

Kevan comes back almost before they start to look for him. Perry comes back at the end of harvest dangling a straw hat covered in strawflowers from her hand, her hair straggling on the back of her head. Ferrand comes back from Margam bringing Ranal and Taveth and baby Perry, astonishing his parents. Hanethe just turns up one day without warning before the daymeal, sixty years after she walked away without looking back.

Taveth is making dinner when Chayra comes into the kitchen through the garden door. "There is someone else for daymeal. I don't know who she is, but I heard Ferrand inviting her as I was saying goodbye to Gislain, so I thought I'd come around this way and let you know."

Taveth almost drops the pan. She saves it with an awkward clutch that spares her feet the boiling water but spills a handful of peas. "A stranger?" she asks.

"A stranger to me at least," Chayra agrees, bending to pick up the spilled peas and drop them into the bowl where they collect scraps for the hens.

"You've been here more than eight years now, you must know everyone in Applekirk!" Taveth says, trying not to sound impatient.

"I thought so too, but I didn't know this woman," Chayra says calmly. "Ferrand was chatting to her as if he knew her, but I'm sure I don't."

"It wasn't Perry come home before we looked for her?" Taveth asks, with a surge of hope. She kneels to take the bread out of the oven and sets it on the table.

"Definitely not. I'd know Perry, she can't have changed all that much. Anyway, this woman she looked quite old, I thought. Older than you, maybe fifty or so? She was wearing silk, so I thought she'd probably come from the east."

Before Taveth can speak, Hodge comes bustling down the stone-flagged passage that leads past the larder to the dining room. He stops ceremoniously in the doorway, looking around to see whether he has their attention. "Everything is ready," he announces.

Melly comes running up behind him, banging into him hard. She is eight, a year and a half older than Hodge, taller but much slighter in build. "Melly, be careful," Chayra and Taveth say in chorus, then smile at each other in appreciation of their shared role.

"Nothing knocks Hodge over, he's too solid," Melly says irrepressibly.

"But you should still be careful, it might not have been Hodge who was standing there. Look where you're going," Taveth says, taking a knob of butter from the crock and adding it to the peas. Chayra sets the bread on a wooden board, ready to take in.

"Father said—" Melly begins.

"No, I want to tell it," Hodge interrupts. "Father said there is an extra person—"

"—and it's Granny Hanethe!" Melly's words are almost indistinguishable for running into each other.

Taveth is glad she has set down the peas.

"Granny Hanethe?" Chayra asks. "Goodness me."

"I never heard of her before. Who is she?" Hodge asks.

"She's your father's grandmother, no, great-grandmother," Taveth says. "I only know because there was some question of calling Melly after her, but we didn't because we didn't know whether she was dead."

"And it seems she isn't," Chayra says, her eyes asking a thousand questions which she doesn't want to ask in front of the children, because they don't know not to repeat them in front of Hanethe.

"Ugh, I'm glad you didn't." Melly shudders. "I like being Melibee. Hanethe is such an ugly name."

"It's just as well we didn't," Taveth agrees. "Now take the peas, Hodge." She hands the boy the bowl. "Can you manage the lamb, Melly?"

"I'll take the salt," Melly says, seeing it on the table and snatching it up, tossing it above her head and running off with it trailing jerkily in the air a few feet behind her.

"If she'd done that with the meat it would have spilled all down the passage," Chayra says.

Taveth opens the oven, moves her hands automatically to protect them, and takes out the savoury smelling lamb.

"It *would* be that old blue dish when we have company," Chayra complains, taking up the bread from the table.

"I like it," Taveth says mildly, leading the way out of the kitchen. "Besides, it's the biggest. If you want to make us another big dish, I'll use it. It's no use having a potter in the family if you don't make what we need." She smiles. "Besides, is Hanethe company? She's got to count as family even if none of us have ever met her." The larder door swings open as usual as she comes up to it. She nudges it shut with her knee.

"Tegnay! Do we greet her as family or as a stranger?" Chayra asks.

Taveth stops and Chayra bumps into her. "I have no idea," she says. "And we're going to eat. We're going to have to bless the food and welcome her."

"That's your lifelode, not mine," Chayra says automatically, so close that Taveth can feel the breath on her neck. "I may be Ferrand's wife, but you're in charge of keeping the house and that means everything about keeping the house, even difficult decisions."

"It should be Ferrand's decision," Taveth says. "He's lord of the manor."

"Yes, definitely. She's his grandmother, not ours."

"Great-grandmother," Taveth corrects. Her hands are starting to grow warm under the dish. She should move on into the dining room so she can set it down. "But it's even worse than that—I've just remembered. She wasn't just one of his great-grandparents. She was lady of the manor."

"An heiress?" Chayra sounds interested. "All I've heard about her is that she just went away one day."

"She must have been an heiress, I suppose. But that's not the point. She may want to take the lordship up again." Taveth's hands are now decidedly hot.

"Ferrand won't like that."

"No indeed. But he should have told me how to welcome her. He could have sent a message even if he couldn't come himself. This way it all falls on me."

"Probably she was there the whole time. She looked like a pretty decided sort of person," Chayra says.

Taveth walks on. If she is to get the lamb to the table without burning her hands, she needs to do it quickly. She wishes she had Ferrand's yeyan skill, inherited by Melly and Hodge, of floating things on the air. "I suppose she has to be family."

"How can we even tell if it's her?" Chayra asks quietly, for they are now nearly at the dining room door. Although it is

oak and firmly shut it is not impossible that people might hear them. "Nobody would be alive who remembers her leaving. Anyone could claim to be her."

"Maybe there's a family resemblance," Taveth says, then nods sternly at the dining room door. It obediently swings open before her.

5

They call it a manor house, but Applekirk was built as a castle, not long after Jankin's fabled Marisian Empire collapsed like a mud pie. The oldest part is the gatehouse and after that the great hall, which they call the dining room. The newest part is the kitchen, which has a sloping tile roof, like the houses in the village. The passage between them runs inside the stone walls and is always cool, even in the summer heat. There is a larder off that passage whose over-enthusiastic door swings open every time Taveth passes. She develops an automatic habit of putting out her hand to shut it. All the doors of the house are aware—they open when asked and close behind. They can speak, though they seldom do, and they have a very limited and specialised vocabulary dealing largely with insides, outsides, and variations of passage through. Their god is two-faced Janver. They can recognise danger—twice in Jankin's time they all close at once when the great gate closes.

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They are eating. Jankin is asking Chayra if they ever dance Westmarch dances here when the door speaks creakily. "Intruders," it says. "Gates closing."

Jankin gives a start and stares as if he'd never heard a door speak before—he hasn't—in Marakanda doors are eternally mute.

"Who is it?" Gislain asks, her hand dramatically on her heart.

"The door can't tell," Hodge says, condescendingly—perhaps he is too young to recognise a rhetorical question.

"I'll go and see," Ferrand says. "Ranal?"

Ranal is already standing with his hand on the weapon rack, under the window where it has been since Hanethe was a child. "It's probably some excited farmers wanting to see us about the harvest," he says, but he hands a pike to Ferrand.

"Can I come?" Melly asks.

"Don't be silly," Taveth says. "No children are going, just in case. You can stay with me and help me make galettes for when everyone gets back from this false alarm."

"I'll come," Gislain says, taking bow and quiver from the rack. Hanethe wonders what good she thinks a bow might be in the dark, but a bow is Diktin's chosen weapon and her priest can use it in any light. Chayra takes a foil. Jankin hesitates, looking at Taveth, who is carrying Tydsey and herding the other children out into the kitchen. Then he looks at the others. "I can use a knife," he says tentatively. Chayra hands him another foil without comment, and offers a third to Hanethe, who is on her feet with no memory of having gotten up.

Hanethe takes the foil. "It's been years since I used one. I defend myself with yeya."

Chayra rolls her eyes and takes up a sword-stop for her other hand. "If I'd thought of fighting I'd have worn something more practical," she says. She has on her white floating dress, unbelted, with nowhere to put a weapon. Hanethe grimaces in sympathy as Ferrand leads them out at the far end of the dining room.

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She is still wearing it later that night when she and Jankin return the weapons to the rack. The dining room is dark. Chayra waves a hand at one of the candles on the table, which lights with a surprised sizzle. "You hold all these and I'll slot them in. I know how they go," she says.

"Certainly," he says, smiling at her. He stands very still, arms full, as Chayra first loads him with weapons and then takes them back one at a time. "One missing," she says. "Hanethe. It would be. I'm trying not to be irritated with her."

"She's certainly causing some trouble," Jankin says diplomatically.

"Yes, but Taveth thinks the weather out of the East is causing us to be cross with her. So I'm trying to be as calm and logical as I can about her." She turns and looks over her shoulder at Jankin with the last sword half-slotted into the rack. "Like you, Westerner," she says, her eyes glinting at him in the light of the single candle.

He has to kiss her. Jankin believes anyone would, in that half dark, when she is so beautiful and looking at him like that.

After a little she moves slightly away, breathing hard, eyes wide. "You're so lovely," he says.

"We need to talk about this," she says, tossing her braid back over her shoulder. "Meanwhile, help me carry some chairs."

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The dining room runs from the base of the east tower north along the east wall. The door at the far end leads to the offices and the justice room, Ferrand's part of the house. The other door leads down to the kitchen. It is a huge room, high-ceilinged, with delicate stone barrel-vaulting arches. The walls are hung with splendid if slightly threadbare tapestries, showing dim religious themes. When Hanethe was young she is made to help sew them by her grandmother Melibee until her wrists are numb, so she always hates them. Their age and wear are a shock to her when she comes back. Ferrand is fond of them and refuses to remove or even restore them. When Hodge is lord he has them taken down, replacing them with more candle sconces, lighting the room brightly. Until then the room is badly lit. There is an arrowslit complete with embrasure in the

southern wall, which all the children adore, generation after generation, and which the archers use to shoot out of during the later part of the siege. There are four more arrowslits, less recessed, between the tapestries in the eastern wall. The room is thus always just as shadowed on summer evenings when it is light outside, as in winter when it is lit by the fire against the western wall. When Hodge as a child runs into the dining room he peers out of the big arrowslit. There is never anything different to see, but he does it until he is old enough to be embarrassed when Tydsey catches him at it.

The great hall could easily seat a hundred. It never holds so many for a formal feast in Taveth's day—they hold the annual harvest feast for the village outside by the river. The most they seat in the dining room is eighty, when Ferrand and Chayra marry. Everyone well born comes from the whole neighbourhood. Even Lord Engleram comes, bringing his wife, which shows how well he thinks of Ferrand—it isn't everyone who sees their goodlord at their wedding, let alone bringing his family. Ferrand is proud, but Chayra takes it as her due. Taveth organises the meal—trout and apples, roast boar, mushrooms and edamame, and little cakes drenched in summersweet. They set their daily table, which can seat sixteen, on the dais, and arrange everyone else on three trestles running the length of the hall. When the meal is over the trestles are removed. Three fiddlers and a piper come in to lead the dance. Taveth is so very pregnant with Melly she cannot dance—Taveth never seems to have the chance to dance—she gets a little wistful watching the dancers, even while she says over and over that she does not mind. There is more dancing after Chayra comes—she brings with her the custom of dancing by firelight on midwinter eve and this becomes the heart of their midwinter celebration.

On everyday occasions the dais stands empty but for a slab of flowering jasper in a vase Chayra makes. The great oak table sits near the eastern wall where it gets a little light. Benches

run along either side of it and two carved oak chairs of immeasurable antiquity sit at head and foot. The one at the head is Ferrand's and the other is Taveth's until one day Chayra, pregnant with Tydsey, needs a chair with a back. After that it is hers until Hanethe arrives and assumes it as her manor-right.

"Typical Hanethe arrogance," Chayra says.

"She used to be the lord once," Taveth replies.

The first time Taveth sees Hanethe she is sitting there directly in the beam of light from the southern window. Taveth can see her more clearly than anyone else in the room. Hanethe left here sixty years ago at the age of thirty-seven when her son, Ferrand's grandfather Yann, was twenty-two, but she does not look much more than fifty. Truly, travelling makes mockery of time, Taveth thinks. To her disappointment, Hanethe does not look especially like any of them. She is darker than Chayra—almost everyone is darker than Chayra—who is so fair that she must cover her skin in the summer to avoid burning it. She is lighter than Ferrand and Hodge, more the colour of an aged pine plank. Her hair is greying like the side of a badger. As Chayra has already told Taveth, she is dressed in green silk shot with gold, topped with a shoulder cloak of gold silk tied under her chin, half covering her small breasts. It is not a fashion Taveth knows, and big-breasted and liking her comfort she hopes it will not soon become popular. Hanethe has a twisted half-smile on her face which Taveth cannot read and no shadow-selves showing at all.

Hanethe has almost forgotten in her desire to come home, how much she hated home when she was here. The stark ugliness of the dining room, compared to what she has been accustomed to in the East, brings it all back. She finds it overwhelming and oppressive. Seventeen years, but long enough here for tapestries to fade and for her strong young son to be long dead of his age. She bites her lip in a way that had once

been a familiar habit. She wishes she had not come, but after all where else could she have gone?

Setting the table is always the children's job. Hanethe does it as a child and so does Ferrand. In Jankin's time, Hodge and Melly take turns with it. Taveth surreptitiously checks to make sure they haven't forgotten anything. When it is Hodge's turn he brings in armfuls of flowers, hearts-ease, lilies-of-the-valley, and scambells, and sets them around the candle in its great brass sconce. He very often forgets to wipe the sconce clean of wax or leaves the waxy cloth on the table. Taveth must collect it and put it in her pocket. Melly doesn't bother with flowers, but she remembers to wipe the sconce. She sometimes forgets to fill the pitchers with ale and water, and both children regularly forget one or more of the four condiments they take with their meals. "Mustard, pickles, summersweet, and salt!" Taveth calls after them, but they cannot remember from one day to the next.

There are cups and plates at each place, all made by Chayra. Taveth considers plates unnecessary when there is good bread to be a trencher, but they don't do any harm. They are glazed red plates Chayra makes from the river clay, each set with a white line which, seen right, is a horse running. Gislain thinks them most elegant, so Taveth always makes sure they use them when she is there. Before Chayra there are no plates, and the cups are misshapen and easily broken, except for Ferrand's golden lord's cup.

The sun comes streaming through the south window-slit in the summer afternoons, lighting up the weapon rack so that it almost glows. Taveth turns to go back to the kitchen after checking the table and sees a mote or two of dust dancing in the beam of sunlight. She tuts to herself—the yeyana against dust always runs down fastest in the dining room and the sewing room above it, because they are so old. She pulls a fine black hair from the cloud clinging around her head, twists it swiftly into the right shape, and sets it on the windowseat under the

arrowslit. The old one, clotted with thick soft dust, she drops into the pocket of her smock beside the dirty cloth.

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When Hanethe arrives, finding Ferrand is easy. She asks in the village for the lord of the manor and he recognises her name, of course. The house is still very much the same and Ferrand brings her in past the offices. She takes nothing in until she is seated at the table. It dawns on her at last that she is really here in Applekirk again. She lowers her eyes, looking through her lashes at the room and the people, who are in some sense family but in another reassuring sense all strangers. They seem a very normal family to Hanethe, four adults and four children, ranging in age from the gurgling baby to the moody adolescent.

It isn't so normal for them. Taveth carries the food in and finds an awkward silence. "Lamb and peas," she says, and little Tydsey, perched on Ferrand's knee, lets out a crow of delight which makes everyone laugh and breaks the tension. Chayra puts down the bread and tells the door to close.

Taveth sets the blue dish into place. It is still bubbling. Chayra begins to slide the bread onto the plates and Taveth takes up the ladle to dish out the lamb on top. She is glad of the plates, for once, being sure there would have been none when Hanethe was lady of Applekirk. Hodge, standing precariously on the bench, adds a spoonful of peas to each plate and Melly distributes them around the table. Usually everyone talks through this procedure of serving, but now it is quiet except for the muted clatter of the wooden spoons against the dishes and plates. Taveth looks across at Ranal, who is looking at his plate expectantly. Next she tries to meet Ferrand's eye, but he seems absorbed in jiggling Tydsey.

If Taveth had known earlier that Hanethe would be here she would have sent Hodge to the winecellar, but it is too late now. Taveth turns to Chayra. "Could you pour the ale?" Chayra

tosses back her braid and moves around the table filling the ale cups, mixing ale judiciously with water for the children, giving Kevan half and half, Taveth notes, where she would have given him only a third, like Hodge and Melly. She finishes serving the lamb, and stands in her own place on the bench, between Kevan and Melly. She looks at Hanethe and for a moment sees a shadow—an immense angry woman nothing like the way she looks now. Everyone is looking at Taveth. She looks around, but when she looks back at Hanethe the shadow has gone.

It is time to bless the food. Taveth always gives the blessing. Normally she finds it a joy but tonight it is difficult for her because she isn't sure whether Hanethe counts as family or as a stranger. It should be Ferrand's decision—he is lord of the manor and Hanethe is his great-grandmother. She looks at Ferrand, trying to deduce his intentions. He makes a minute gesture with his eyes towards Hanethe, which might mean anything.

Taveth wishes Gislain were there so she could give a general blessing to family and friends, avoiding the issue or even asking Gislain to bless them all. Oh well, no use wishing for a fish up a tree. It all falls firmly onto her shoulders. For a moment she hesitates, sure that Hanethe sees her hesitating and is darkly amused. She decides to keep the blessing as formal as possible.

"Holy Mother Mitra," she begins, safely enough. Everyone bows their heads, even little Tydsey. Seeing the bowed heads she feels all at once fiercely fond of her family. "Blessings and peace be on this manor and domain of Applekirk, and on Ferrand our lord. Blessings be on this good food and blessings on all of those who grew it, those who helped prepare it, and those who share it. And welcome home Hanethe whose lifelode has led her here again."

As she finishes she snaps her fingers to catch a flame out of the air and flicks it to the wick of the candle in the centre of the table. Taveth sits down. Now they can eat.

Hanethe takes a bite. "Are these all of your children?" she asks Ferrand.

Ferrand starts guiltily. "I should introduce you to everyone properly," he says. "This is my wife Chayra. She is a potter and she made the bowl and the plates we're using."

Chayra, on the bench beside Ferrand, looks up from her plate and smiles, a little nervously. Hanethe tries to return the smile, but is surprised. She has assumed Taveth is Ferrand's wife because she gave the blessing. She wonders at the thought of the lord of the manor having a wife with a profession. Things have changed since she was young. "Lovely plates," she says, "Far finer than any we had in my time."

Next Ferrand indicates Taveth, who is looking pleased. "This is Taveth, who keeps the house."

"Wonderful dinner," Hanethe says, though she has so far eaten only a mouthful of peas. She thinks they are good enough, for peas. Both Chayra and Taveth have their breasts covered and Hanethe thinks they are dowdy and old fashioned.

Ferrand nods at Ranal. "This is Ranal, whose lifelode is farming. He keeps up our home farm and organises the tenants on theirs when that's needed."

Ranal, whose mouth is full, grunts. Hanethe smiles again, awkwardly, unnaturally, thinking that the farming should be part of Ferrand's work. She wonders what he does, as she tears off a corner of bread and scoops up some more peas.

"Our oldest daughter Peronel, presently away in the east, will be home in half a month or so. The ones you see are Kevan," who squirms when Hanethe meets his eyes, "Melibee,"—Hanethe cannot suppress a start at the name, though the little girl who now holds it is nothing at all like Grandmother Melibee—"Hodge, who is my heir, and little Tydelen, usually called Tydsey."

He does not say their parentage. Hanethe deduces it without explanation. Hodge, as he is the heir, must be the child of Ferrand and his wife Chayra. His colouring reflects his parentage. Of the others, she correctly guesses that Kevan must be Taveth and Ranal's son; Melibee, Taveth and Ferrand's;

and Tydsey, Ranal and Chayra's. "What a perfect little family," Hanethe says, with only a trace of sarcasm. Marriage... she doesn't want to think about that.

Ferrand smiles uncomfortably, and an uneasy silence falls. Hanethe turns her attention to her lamb, which she considers overspiced, full of herbs and about as subtle as a sermon. Food in the East tends to be very plain and she has grown accustomed to that.

"Good lamb," Ferrand says heartily to Taveth. Hanethe glances at him to check for insincerity, but he really means it. Taveth is a good cook, for those accustomed to Eastmarch cooking. "And wonderful peas. Well done, Hodge."

Hodge is pouring summersweet carefully on his daymeal. "I watched them boil," he informs the table.

Silence falls again. Hanethe can sense that they all want to ask her questions, but do not know how. She had never thought she would be glad of the reticence of the Marches. "Where in the east is Peronel?" she asks. "What is she studying?"

"Weaving," Taveth says proudly. Hanethe manages not to shudder. "In Belvede."

"Belvede's still in the Marches," Hanethe says, amazed at such ignorance. "That isn't the real east."

"It's famous for weaving," Kevan says aggressively, emphatically, as if he expects her to deny it.

"I've never known much about weaving," Hanethe says peaceably, although she had never cared much about it either.

"We send a lot of our wool to Belvede," Ranal says.

Try as she might, Hanethe cannot think of a response to that.

"It's been a lovely day," Chayra says, making a valiant conversational effort. "Beautiful sunshine. I went out and enjoyed it, walking around the village with Gislain."

"Gislain's a sweetheart of Chayra's, an ambule priest of Diktin," Taveth explains, leaning towards Hanethe and smiling. "She's here for the season."

"I met Diktin once, at a dance," Hanethe says politely.

Hodge's mouth falls open, revealing an unappetising mass of chewed bread.

Hanethe wonders what she said wrong. Everyone knows the gods live in the east, surely? If they don't know that they won't understand anything of why she is here. At some point she knows she is going to have to tell them, Ferrand at least. After a moment in which everyone seems to be struck dumb, Ranal reverts to the safe topic of the weather.

"Almost too hot for the animals, this afternoon," he says. "The cows were glad to come into the cool of the byre to be milked and didn't want to go out again. But the barley's come on marvellously. I'm going to start cutting it in a few days. I was talking to Mattatha and she thinks the same. I asked her to tell the village we are ready."

Taveth groans. "You'll want food and small beer sent to the fields at noon?"

"I want to help cut," Melly says.

"Everyone helps with harvest," Hodge says.

"I'll certainly lend a hand," Hanethe says quietly, remembering harvests long ago, and the first terrible harvest after the plague when there were not people enough to gather it in and the wheat rotted on the stalk. Never again.

"I know you'll all want to be out in the fields, but as I say at this time every year, I'll need someone to help me too," Taveth says.

"We'll take turns," Chayra says.

They are so nice, Hanethe thinks, such pleasant normal people. She hadn't very much thought about them. Inasmuch as she had thought at all she imagined Granny Melibee and Uncle Adoun and Yann, her family as it had been after the Plague had thinned them. These cheerful strangers who greet her as family are another matter. Maybe it isn't fair to stay here and risk harm to them. But here in the Marches, where her own thinking feels like wading through mud, she doesn't think Agdisdis will

diminish herself to pursue. She twitches at her cloak uneasily. Nothing will happen in a hurry, she tells herself, the time distance in itself ensures that. She can stay here for a while and flee farther west later if it proves to be necessary.

She takes another mouthful of the lamb, too rich, too spicy for her taste, but hot and ungrudged. She has escaped from Agdisdis, she is home at last. "I always enjoyed helping with the harvest," she says.

6

"How long before Jankin came did Hanethe come?" Kevan asks, slipping the fish off the hook and into his basket. "I know Hanethe came first."

Taveth can't remember. "A day or two?" she wonders uncertainly.

"Longer. Much longer. A month at least," Hodge has a child's memories, where time stretches differently, as it does to east and west. "I remember Jankin coming," he says. "I met him by the gate."

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It is a long road from Marakanda to Applekirk, and one that grows stranger as it goes. Jankin is a scholar and a historian. He understands what it means when roofing slate gives way to soft red tile on the houses of the wealthy. They taught him about rocks in the Academie of Marakanda and how people choose to build. He is, however, bemused when the thatch on the cottages of the poor, who are rarely mentioned in the Academie at all, gives way to the same clay tiles. Are the poor wealthier here, or are they giving up something they can scarce do without to have tiles because of a lack of thatch? And what might cause such a lack? Or is there some problem with using thatch here? He asks the guards and the guides of the caravan, and receives a variety of answers which amount to the fact that they had never thought about it. Jankin, who is used to answers like that, observes missing tiles here and there, remembers patch-

ing thatch on icy mornings after windy nights and leans more towards his second hypothesis.

The caravan, like the road, changes on the journey. It grows and swells, then shrinks again as they come to destination towns, and swells again with new travellers. Despite the hefty fees the caravan charges, few care to travel alone through unknown lands. The caravan provides not only protection from any rogues and robbers who might be on the road, but a sure knowledge of the way. In eastern lands, such a thing might be a lifesaver to many. Jankin, who has a good map and feels he could have found his way, considers saving money by travelling alone. He chooses the caravan more for the familiarity of having people around him who are not different every night. The number of wagons and pack-horses changes, but wagons and pack-horses remain a constant.

Jankin observes the travellers; merchants, ambules, and novices. For the most part they are in ones and twos, with the occasional party going on pilgrimage or to a wedding. Once, a group tries to join them who are going on a raid, but the guards draw their weapons and send them away. Jankin makes friends with the guards and guides. They are people who have no fixed home but the caravan itself. Their life is travel and, for people of no education, they know a surprising amount about the world. He finds them more congenial than anyone he has met except his fellow scholars. They tell him about towns they have seen and people they have met, and he takes it all in with the same keen interest he turns on whatever falls under his eye.

As they draw more eastward, other things change. Yeya becomes more commonplace. In Marakanda most folk light fires with tinderboxes. By the time he reaches Darragon people pluck a spark between their fingers when they want one. In Darragon, fortune telling is quackery, just like at home, but the guards tell him that in Margam and Belvede there are seers who can truly divine some of the clouded future. In Engleram he sees a man walking on the air, not with an effort as a trick

to amuse the crowd, but simply to avoid a muddy puddle. Also in Engleram, he learns that the flowers he has begun to see growing on stone walls as he came along are not lichen, but the stone itself flowering for summer. He watches himself for any developing yeyan strangeness, but finds nothing different. Maybe you have to be born to it, he thinks. They taught him very little about yeya in the Academie. Kalmar's great work on the natural world touches on it briefly, only to dismiss it: *"As to the aeaean arts we shall have nothing more to say, for their study is profitless except in the East, where study itself is profitless. Such news as comes to us of them is second-hand and contradictory and we shall confine ourselves hereafter to the tangible world."* While yeya is woven through all the histories as it is through the world, there is little academic study of it probably because it is so hard to practice in Marakanda. People who want to learn yeya go east, where it is stronger. Jankin does not want to learn it, but to understand how it works. He finds it interesting, as he finds everything.

He plucks a stone flower from a wall and keeps it safely in his pack, but is disappointed to find a few days later that it has crumbled to sand. He wanted to take it home to Marakanda where sculpture and statues are thought the highest form of art, to see if people would think it carved and what it might signify that it was not.

He sighs and straightens his heavy pack. He is interested in everything and wants to understand it all—that is his curse and his blessing. He loved his novice years at the Academie when he studied the Marisians in the morning, rocks in the afternoon, and the stars at night, then woke the next day to study alchemistry in the morning, architecture in the afternoon, and the effects of strong beer upon the constitution of young scholars in the evening. It felt as if all doors had finally been flung open to his curiosity. He wanted nothing more than to stay at the Academie forever. That was what he told Learned Peacock, who smiled drily, gave him a stipend, and told him to choose

a field of specialization. Being limited to that field came like cold water down the neck. But he told himself they did not keep him at the Academie to satisfy his curiosity but to add to the store of human knowledge, and continued with his work on the Marisian Empire. He still secretly feels he would have added more to the sum of human knowledge, though it be but a scrap here and there that would be useful to others, had he been allowed to continue at all of it headlong. He can't close his eyes to everything in the world except history. Fortunately, he has friends in other disciplines who will answer his questions when they can and ponder them when they cannot.

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One of the guides leaves the front of the caravan and comes to walk beside him. "We'll be at Applekirk within the hour," she says. "It's not much of a place, so we're not stopping. There's only you and one ambule leaving us there, nobody joining, no goods to deliver or take up, and we have very few letters."

"Well, goodbye and safe journey," Jankin says, hesitating over the familiar phrase. You could not say *safe return* to someone whose lifelode kept them moving, who might have been travelling so long that those at home had forgotten her.

She looks at him directly. "I'll be sorry to lose you, Jankin, and that's not something I say to many. You've been no trouble, and you've helped to pass the time along the way with your knowledge and your questions too. We're heading on to Arraford and then to Belvede, which is the farthest east we go. We'll be back through this way in about a month, maybe three or four months as time will go here. If you're seeking to return to Marakanda then we'd be pleased to take you up with us for only the food fee."

"That's remarkably generous," Jankin says, touched—the food fee is less than a quarter the usual rate.

"Just you, and just with us," the guide says, her natural caution asserting itself. She grins to soften it. "The real profit in caravanning is taking the goods—taking the people...well most of the fee is for the annoyance they cause us."

"I'll do my best to be ready to go back with you," Jankin says.

"We'll plan to make an overnight stop here then, to be sure of taking you up," she says.

Before Jankin can say anything they come over the crest of the hill and Applekirk lies before him. It has changed out of all recognition from the drawings he has of it. He would not have known it. He had not expected to, considering the age and provenance of the drawings, and how far east he had come. Two thousand years in Marakanda must be seven or eight hundred here. The manor house shows traces of early fortification, two towers standing above the rambling roof-tiles of later elaboration. There is garden around it and a barely defensible curtain wall which does, unless he misses his guess entirely, nevertheless date from the time of the towers. The village, with a charming little nemet, sprawls away in typical Eastmarch fashion from the manor gates. There is a little stream with a mill and a millpond upon which floats a scattering of ducks. The early afternoon sun shines kindly on the flowering grey stone. In the fields that spread out to either side of the road, peasants are engaged in harvesting the grain he has been told is barley, bearded barley. There is no sign whatsoever of the Marisian outpost he is sure was once here.

He turns to the guide. "I am overcome with your kindness and generosity," he says. "My whole stay among strangers will be lightened by the thought that I will have the company of friends on my way back to Marakanda."

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Although the caravan does not halt, Jankin is able to bid farewell to all of his especial friends before the long trail of wagons

and pack-horses passes quite out of the village. He is so engaged with this that he is quite surprised as the last shouted rejoinders die away, to find himself alone on the dusty road between the nemet and the millpond. There is nobody in sight except the ambule who had been in the caravan who is now staring at him disconcertingly.

"Bless me, Mother," he says, as soon as he becomes aware of her notice. He bows his head.

"Agdisdis's blessings on you, man of Marakanda," the priest says. "What brings you to Applekirk?"

"I am a scholar here upon research," Jankin says smoothly. Then, in a much more natural tone he goes on: "How did you know I was from Marakanda?" As soon as he asks he realizes that someone in the caravan must have told her. He has hardly been keeping his origin a secret and where he joined them was probably well known.

"You wear a leather pack, a leather coat, and leather boots, too warm for the weather. You wear that curly hair forced up in a scholar's bun and you ask how I know you are from Marakanda, as famous for its tanneries as for its Academie?"

"You are an acute observer, Mother," he says, and looks at her, hoping to make similar deductions. He can tell nothing like as much from her appearance. As a priest she naturally wears no clothing that would give any clues. She is of average height, middle years, and dark complexion, with large and sagging breasts between which nestles her priest's yeyana. She has a brown cloth bag over one arm, not very large, and a carved staff in her other hand. Her eyes are disconcertingly bright and as he looks at them he feels as if she must know everything he is thinking. She joined the caravan at Engleram, he thinks, or perhaps a day or two before. He had not paid much attention to her.

"It is Holy Agdisdis who sees and tells me," she says. She sketches a holy symbol in the air with her staff when she mentions the name of the goddess. It glows and lingers for a moment. Jankin is impressed with this demonstration of

the goddess's favour until he remembers how far east they are. "Why did you leave Marakanda?" she asks.

"Research. Historical research." He hesitates, wondering how much to explain. "The Marisian Empire may have had a base here and I—"

"That is not all," she says, cocking her head as if listening to someone speaking. "Research yes, but that could have been done any time. Why did you come now? You had reasons for leaving Marakanda? Debts? A desire to return with a triumphant vindication of your ideas? Something complicated to do with scholarship? A woman?"

Her way of speaking makes it feel as if she is relaying suggestions from someone else, as if, Jankin realizes, she really is in communion with the goddess. He shivers. The questions she asks are all too accurate, and not like questions at all.

"Debts, yes, but nothing major," he says. This is true. He has calculated that his stipend will accumulate for all the months he is away, which will add up to three or four years in Marakanda, and it will more than suffice to pay the little pile of urgent copyist's bills and tavern bills and tailor's bills and grocery bills that had been pressed on him before he left. "As for the rest, yes, in part, but none of that is any of—"

"Everything is the business of the gods," she interrupts him again. He gapes at her. He had not even said it, she caught the words out of his mind. Behind him, in the pond, the ducks splash in a sudden flurry of impatience.

"What business would you have with me, Mother?" he asks cautiously.

"I am here in Applekirk in pursuit of an evildoer. You may be an instrument sent to help me, although you do not know it. I must know all of why you are here."

Jankin bows his head again, dumbfounded. Never in his life has he come across such a thing. The hierarchy of the Nemet do pursue people—of course they do—but not usually like this. "I did wish to have a triumph in my research," he admits. "And

I had displeased my superior by making inquiries into things that were not strictly necessary. As for the woman, that would be to bring shame on a name."

"No name is required," she says briskly. "Is it a married woman?" He meets her eyes again by mistake and feels hard pressed.

"No, Mother," he says, letting his eyes fall before her. "A girl, the sister of a friend of mine. She wishes to be bedded and wedded and I would not marry her because she is a fool."

"Is she with child?"

"Not by me!" Jankin answers. "I have done nothing that could get her so, nothing. I was just being polite, but she saw it as being more particular in my attentions than I should have been. Some say a scholar should not marry and in any case I have no money to support a wife."

"Everyone should marry," the priest says, as if stating an axiom.

Of course a priest of Agdisdis, guardian of marriage, would say that. Jankin wants to kick himself for his thoughtlessness. He tries to catch himself. "Whether or not, I have no money and she has neither money nor profession, and even worse she is a fool and I could never live with a fool. By the time I return she will have found someone else to marry."

"And are those all your reasons?" the priest asks.

"Yes, and the strongest of them is to do my research and take it back with me," Jankin says.

The priest stands staring at him for a moment. "You may be the one I need," she says. Jankin feels a strong desire not to have any more to do with her. He looks around for someone to help him out, but the road remains deserted. He cannot even see the harvesters. "Where do you stand with the gods?"

"I am not a pious man," Jankin says, and this is true. As a child he was dragged to nemet with the other village children. As a novice he rejoiced in examining the nature of the gods with the others, and while he tried to keep a spirit of reverence

it was not always possible. He has a sentimental attachment to Mitra, to whom the nemet in his home village was dedicated, but he never does anything to express it. He does not work on holy days and in recent years when they come around he goes to nemet of his own accord and feels happier for it. But that is the extent of his adult observance. He is glad when the caravan times its halts in larger towns to coincide with the celebration of a holy day there, but more from curiosity than piety. He visits nemets and shrines he passes and never fails to ask a blessing from a priest he meets, but if nothing reminds him he could go for days without thinking of the gods at all. He could have written a book on how religious practice had changed from the days of the Marisians to today, but he would have done so without wondering whether the gods would be offended at what he wrote. He is more superstitious than devout, believing in luck more than faith. Even in coming east he thinks more of the increase in yeya than the nearness of the gods. All this goes through his mind in a flash and he feels that the priest reads it there.

She sniffs. "Yet you are a votary and have taken vows."

"Yes," Jankin says, and shuffles his feet, making the dust rise to tickle his nose. "I am a scholar, you know, not a priest."

"There shall be no scholarship without the Nemet," she says. "Who said that, Marakandan?"

"Yovan of Narised," he says, and knows that while Yovan and the people of his time had meant *outside* by *without*—no scholarship by those who denied the gods (which was bad enough)—this formidable priest believes it truly meant *without*, in the sense of the Nemet breathing down scholars' necks. "Yet while all of us at the Academie of Marakanda take minor vows, they are the vows of scholars."

"Even so, if I call upon you to aid me, and call by that vow, you cannot refuse me."

Jankin feels a chill, despite his warm leather clothing and the heat of the day. He had sworn his vows when he accepted

the stipend and the fellowship of the Academie. He had seen them as an oath to scholarship. He had chosen, as many did, to dedicate his vow to Ganipay, whose sacred spring lies near Marakanda. It had been a compromise in the days of Yovan, when the Nemet had been strong but afraid of competition from the scholars of the day, some of whom had been atheists and heretics. All the same, if Jankin refuses aid asked by a priest in the name of that vow he would be renouncing it, and that would mean renouncing scholarship—scholarship, his undoubted, gods-given lifelode. If his refusal should become known he would be cast out of the Academie and no other institution would receive him.

"I could not refuse," he says slowly. He looks into the priest's eyes again and feels that she sees and triumphs over all of him, his whole life and all his thoughts, however mean or distracted.

"What did you think your vow meant?" she asks contemptuously. "What did you think it meant that there be no scholarship without the Nemet? No more than that the gargoyles on the library would smile and open the doors for you and the pies be hot at Berringers that you might warm your fingers on cold mornings?"

He stares at her, utterly beyond speech.

"Oh, yes, I have been to Marakanda, did you think you were the only one who has travelled?"

"I thought it meant the Nemet would not endure impiety in our scholarship," he says, answering her earlier question. "Not that we were making ourselves tools for any priest who called on us."

"You are within the Nemet when we need you," she says. "You're a feeble enough instrument, but you may come very fittingly to the hand."

"I don't even know your name," he says, as if it is the worst indignity of all.

"I am Dolkis," she says. The name suits her—it is as hard and sharp-edged as she is. "And you?"

"Jankin," he replies. She puts out her hand, as people do on being introduced in Darragon and the river regions and touches the palm of his. "Well, you may be of use to me, Jankin," she says quite calmly, as if this kind of thing happened every day. Perhaps it does, to her.

"What do you want me to do to help you?" he asks.

"Where will you stay here?"

"I wrote to the lord of the manor," he says, glad to be on firmer ground. "He offered me a place to stay."

"Good. It is the lord of the manor who is harbouring the miscreant."

"What has he done?"

"Taken her in, against Agdisdis's will," she says. She sees the confusion on Jankin's face. "I spoke of the lord of the manor. The evildoer is a woman. Her name is Hanethe. She has given offence to Agdisdis. She was in the East and she directly offended the goddess, directly, and stole something from her. This village is harbouring her. I will ask the lord of the manor to give her up to my justice. If he will not, the goddess will use you as the instrument of her vengeance."

"Me?" Jankin asks. He is not a fighter. He has a knife to deter trouble with strangers. He knows how to use it, but he has not fought for years and has never killed anyone.

Dolkis laughs shortly, making her belly shake. "You may be a feeble instrument, Jankin of Marakanda, but you will serve the goddess's purpose."

Jankin clutches after what stories of Agdisdis's vengeance against offenders he could remember. "Won't she prefer to act directly and turn Hanethe into a plant or a rock or something?"

"Hanethe fled the East to avoid that," the priest says. "She has powerful yeya."

As powerful as a god? "I'm not sure I could kill a woman who has powerful yeya, let alone the lord of the manor," he admits.

"Did I say anything about killing anyone?" Dolkis looks disgusted. "Agdisdis is a gentle goddess, and her power is over marriage. You will, if necessary, be the instrument of breaking the marriage of the lord of the manor, so he will yield Hanethe to Agdisdis. His wife will fall in love with you."

"That wouldn't break any marriage I ever heard of," Jankin says. He wants to laugh. "People are always falling in love with other people." He quotes an old proverb of the Westmarch. "Horses shy, fruit rots, people fall in love."

"Maybe, but you will make them break whatever agreements they have made to keep their marriage stable and central. It may not be necessary. Indeed, I hope it is not. If they will surrender Hanethe I will take her back to Agdisdis myself, and that will be the end of it."

"But you came from Engleram, didn't you? From west of here in any case?"

"I am a priest of Agdisdis. I have been east of Versen and west of Marakanda. My duties took me to recently to Engleram and now they bring me here. Should they take me into the farthest East, that will be as Agdisdis wills it."

Interesting, Jankin thinks, feeling a crazy desire to make a note. Priests in the Westmarch, even ambule priests, do not usually move around all that much. They generally have a circuit of villages and towns they visit, so each nemet has a priest of each major god for a season every few years, as well as their stable priests who stay where they are. The only ones who move as much as Dolkis says she has are those high in the hierarchy who oversee others. Maybe that is Dolkis's role, Jankin thinks, maybe she is not an ambule after all, but a hierophant. He feels much more on his own ground considering Nemet organisation, which derived long ago, from Marisian organisation. In some interesting ways the hierarchy of the Nemet is what is left of the Marisian Empire.

He looks at Dolkis evenly. "You don't think she'll go quietly?" he asks.

"If she had meant to submit quietly to justice she would not have fled," she says. "And it seems Agdisdis sent you to my hand. What is more likely, after all, when you came here to avoid marriage, which is her province?"

He feels immediately unsettled again. It seems strange and uncomfortable to think of the gods, so far away, interfering in his life like that, extending a finger to pluck him from his place and set him here to do something he had no thought of doing. He isn't sure if he believes it or not. He looks up at the nemet, the flowering grey stone carved with bas-relief stories of the birth of the god Liakan. Liakan's birth somehow offended Agdisdis, he half-remembers with another chill. "I am a man of the Westmarch," he says, shaking his head. "This is all strange to me."

"Say rather of the West, for that is how they see Marakanda here," the priest says. "And the gods can use folk of the West, not as directly as they can in the East, but they can bend them if they choose. You are here to my hand. I think Agdisdis sent you to me, but it is not necessary that you believe so, as long as you obey when I call on you by your vow."

All the long road from Marakanda to Applekirk, Jankin felt free, away from his debts and obligations. Now he feels as if he had been walking into the open jaws of a waiting predator and never guessed it. He wants to know whether this was the case but can think of no way to test it. He looks at Dolkis with dislike.

"What do you want me to do?" he asks.

"I need to speak to them before I give you instructions," she says.

"Shall we go to them now together?" he asks.

"No. Go alone. We must not seem to be confederates. I shall stay with the priests here tonight and speak to them. Then tomorrow I shall confront them. Say nothing of me."

"How shall I know what you decide?"

"You will know," she says, and laughs in a way he does not like.

"Until tomorrow," he says, and turns on his heel, desperate to get away from her and regain his composure.

"It is the other way," she says unkindly.

He turns again and leaves her watching him walk away. He has never met anyone he dislikes more or who makes him feel so exposed. He has never in his life wanted anything less than to aid her in her schemes, or her goddess's schemes. He is a scholar and his vows are scholar's vows—he is a scholar who wants nothing more than to do his research here as rapidly as possible and return home to his place in the Academie and never leave it again. He will do her bidding—he has no choice. What could he do if she threatened him with his oath? What could he do against the gods? The whole thing makes him feel unclean. Never had he imagined having a personal connection with the gods. If he had it would not have been like this, caught like an insect in a pitcher plant.

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He comes to the gateway in the manor walls and walks through, still furious. The iron gates stand open. Then he checks his stride. Most of the gateway is of an age with the walls, but there, lower down on the left, the stones are flatter and closer together with occasional white stones set among them. They are closely set without mortar, while the upper stones are set in a thick brown plaster. Surely that was Marisian work? He pulls out his drawings and centres himself by the stream and the hills. Yes, he thinks, this might have been the corner of their outpost. An hour ago he would have been delighted to find what might be proof of his theory. Now it is the most he can do to care at all. He wishes he had never left Marakanda. He puts his hand on the smooth cool close-set stones that might have been Marisian work and breathes gently to calm himself. If Agdisdis had arranged for him to be here she might have done anything. The Marisians who had come this far might have done it so

he would follow them. Who could tell, the whole Marisian Empire might have been organised to give him something to study that would bring him here today. The whole world, the fascinating and complex world that has delighted Jankin his whole life suddenly feels to him like a brightly coloured sheet flung casually over a chasm by some mountebank.

He feels hot tears burning behind his eyes and can not tell if what he feels is grief or anger.

He leans his head against the rough stones of the upper wall and shuts his eyes to close away the tears. Surprisingly, it helps. He can hear an unfamiliar bird trilling a warning. He can smell moss and stone and dust. The straps of his pack cut into his shoulders. The world is there. In the fields people are harvesting the bearded barley, soon the idle millwheel will be turning to grind it to flour. The Marisians were here and have gone, he is here and will leave, the gods are powerful meddlers but do not rule events, the priest is little different from any blackmailer.

"Hello," says Hodge, coming up from the fields behind him. "Who are you, and whatever are you doing?"

7

Hanethe's arrival too is claimed for other purposes.

"Have you come back to teach me?" Melly asks, in childish self-importance, swinging on the bedroom door. Hanethe, who is likewise selfish and self-centred, stares at her in amazement.

They stare at each other only for a moment more, then Hanethe blinks. "No," she says decidedly. "What made you think that?"

"Well, nobody knows why you've come back. They're all talking about it. And it seems like the kind of thing that might happen." She waves her hands and this time Hanethe sees that she is not doing it aimlessly out of a childish inability to keep stil, but drawing a shape on the air.

"What are you doing?" she asks, curious.

"Seeing the shape," Melly says. "It's a knack I have. Look." She waves her hands again and this time glowing lines linger in the air. Hanethe sees the shape of her life to this point caught in the folds for a moment, a smooth double-loop beginning here, the grief of the plague being caught there, going east and learning, coming to grief there again and returning, being caught once again here.

"You can see the shapes of people's lives?" Hanethe asks, horrified, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Not just lives, not often lives, just anything. It lets me understand it. Like you said the plague and I drew that out—a horrible thing. It will come back, and back again, maybe even

in my generation, but never as bad as it did in your time." Her voice is childish still but quite confident.

"And you want to take this gift into the East, where it will be much stronger?" Hanethe asks, and she, who has walked with gods, who has been a god, is almost awed.

"Not just that. I want to learn all the yeya there is and how it works. For that I need the East. Yeya works better there, everyone says, and besides, that's where people who know go, like you did. But you came back."

Hanethe draws a long breath and pulls on her skirt. "I didn't mean to come back to teach you," she says, disconcerted.

"I saw," she says. "But you will?"

"I don't think I have much choice in the matter," she says. She tries to smile, to soften it, because this is a child, whatever she knows and sees. "Does your mother have this talent? It's not one that comes from our family. Drawing light on the air, that's one I was born with but not seeing things like that."

"Mother sees people at different ages of their life," Melly says, rocking a little to and fro. "My Granny Damasy, Father's mother, has an understanding gift as well. Not like mine, but she sees the way through problems. Perry knows how people will die. I'm glad I don't have that one. The way she looks at me sometimes makes me shiver. Kevan has flashes when he knows what will happen and what can happen. He can't control it. He hates it."

"And your father?" Hanethe's mind is all here, focused, concentrated. Though she is not thinking as clearly as she did in the East she has at least been shocked out of the sense of muddiness.

"He can only bounce things on the air, like Hodge," Melly says, picking up a pot of sweet-scented herbs and petals from the window-sill and demonstrating. She lets go of it and it follows her as she moves. She plays a game with it, drawing it nearer and pushing it away while Hanethe finishes dressing.

"You'll have to change your name," Hanethe says abruptly, standing up and settling her cloak over her shoulders. "My

grandmother was Melibee. Every time I hear the name I think I'm going to see her."

"I'm usually called Melly," she says, putting the pot down again. "And I could have had a much worse name."

"What's that?" Hanethe asks cautiously.

"Hanethe," Melibee replies. "Mother told me last night. They considered it, but Father decided against it because they weren't sure you were dead. That's what first made me think you might have come to teach me."

Hanethe shudders, thinking of that. "I don't know what it would have done to my soul, so far away," she says. "But you must change your name. Melibee is impossible for me if you want to learn from me—I do have a lot I can teach you, though much of what will work here is discipline and hard work, not tricks—if I teach you, I will give you a name and that will be your name for good and all. Are you sure you want this enough for that?"

Melly sketches on the air again without leaving trails for Hanethe to see. She frowns at the pattern, then quite suddenly laughs. "Go ahead," she says.

Hanethe, still more disconcerted and more sure than ever that she needs to teach this child before she gets into trouble using so much yeya so lightly, holds out her hand to the child, who takes it confidently. With her free hand she draws the yeyan symbols on the air, where they glow pink and blue for a moment as she speaks. "This is my child I will teach," she says. "This is my child who came to me for instruction. This is my child whose name and soul are bound to mine."

"Hanethe is my teacher. Hanethe is the teacher I have chosen," the child says confidently, smiling up at her as the symbols glow more brightly, coming through blue to silver. "This is Hanethe whose name I almost bore."

The yeya rises up around them in a great crackling blue-white circle, making their hair rise. "This is my child to rename by mother-right," Hanethe says. The shades of Taveth and

Ferrand rise from the child's shoulders and behind them four more people, their parents. Then smoothly, eight more, one of them two ranks behind Ferrand, her son Yann become middle-aged and plump. Hanethe wonders what killed him and when, but pushes the thought away. Behind him are sixteen more of the child's ancestors, one of them Hanethe aged fifteen, brown-haired and frowning, angry at life and all the world. She puts out her free hand and draws forward her younger self, the one who lives in the child's blood. The child shows no fear but stands calm, waiting. "This is my child to name by mother-right," Hanethe says again, and all the shades are gone, accepting her right. "This is my child to name by mother-right, and the name I shall give her is…" she hesitates then, surrounded by the yeya of the moment, which dips and rises again, but with no name ready. She casts about among old family names, but none of them feel right for this strange child, and besides, she does not know if any of them are in use. The sense the child knows what name she will choose already and is waiting to pounce on the name when she has it is very distracting. At last she remembers the first teacher she knew in the East, a patient old man who was kind to her and taught her well. He had, like her, lost his family in the Plague, though unlike her he had lost them all. He had no children to continue, and his name would be lost. "Emelis," she declares, remembering his qualities of patience and calm, which the child would need. She touches the child's lips and eyes. "Emelis." She says it the third time, calling to her, "Emelis!"

"I'm here," the child, now Emelis, says. The yeyan flames are gone. There are just the two of them in the plain bedroom with the stained plaster ceiling. "And that's wonderful. Mother and Chayra can keep right on calling me Melly. You know nothing would ever have made them change."

"We should go and talk to them," Hanethe says, wondering what she has done, bound herself to, but feeling better than she had since the night, (eleven days ago, twelve?) when Velovis

had said he and Damona would consider what to do, but he could certainly not protect her from Agdisdis and she had better go back to the Marches.

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She teaches Melly every morning except the day of the trial and the day of the ordeal, through all the time she stays at Applekirk. Melly rounds up four village children who have yeya, Hadley, Thad, Nan, and Gisil. Hanethe teaches them too. What she teaches them is discipline, breathing, control, and circle-work. She says there will be no tricks, but she is not above using tricks herself to catch their attention. When she is teaching them how to fix a piece of yeya so it will last without holding on, she makes an invisible bridge in the air and has them all walk along it. Thad grows bored and drops away from the lessons after a few days, but the other four learn to concentrate their yeya, when to use it, and when to refrain. Hanethe feels she has made a good start with them. Only when she is with them does she feel she is doing more than marking time.

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All of this starts with Melly, and with Melly's new name. Taveth is stirring porridge at the fire, suspecting nothing when they come downstairs together. "Did you sleep well?" she asks. "Melly didn't wake you, did she? I told her not to. Ranal and Chayra have eaten their breakfasts and set about their work already, but you are not the last, we haven't seen Kevan or Ferrand yet this morning." She hands Hanethe a warm bowl of porridge.

Hanethe grunts, assuming Taveth does not need answers to her questions. She settles herself on the bench near to the chair that Tydsey is strapped into, opposite Hodge. Some things never change she thinks, for they eat porridge for breakfast

informally in the kitchen when she is a child and when she is lord here.

"Hanethe has come to teach me," Emelis says, sitting down next to Hodge and accepting a scoop of hot porridge from Taveth. "And my name is Emelis now, not Melibee, but you can all still call me Melly."

Hodge's eyes are like saucers, but Taveth feels like someone who had seen a nightwalker. "Is this truth?" she asks.

"It wasn't why I thought I came," Hanethe says evenly, noting Taveth's distress. "Why I came I think I should tell Ferrand first. But this seems to be something that needs to be done."

"It might mean Melly doesn't need to go away to the East," Hodge says, trying to reconcile Taveth to the inevitable.

"I'll need to go," Melly says, ignoring her brother's attempt at consoling Taveth. She takes up the stoppered jug of summersweet and pours it onto her porridge. "But maybe not so soon."

Chayra says once, laughing, that if Ferrand's tact and skills in careful management of people had been shared out between his children, then Hodge took Melly's share as well as his own.

"I can teach her things it would be useful for her to know now, considering her lifelode," Hanethe says, as conciliatingly as she can, stirring her porridge.

"And what gave you the right to change her name?" Taveth asks, flustered out of politeness for once, the scoop still in her hand, dripping unnoticed onto the tile floor.

"I am her mother at four removes and you almost gave her my name," Hanethe says.

"You can still call me Melly," Emelis says, with a child's insistence that keeping that the same makes the rest of it all right.

Little Tydsey bangs her spoon on her bowl.

Taveth sits down on the bench, shaking her head. Hanethe reaches for the summersweet. "We also have wintersweet and jam," Hodge says, with the air of an old man being gracious to

an inferior. "The wintersweet is in the bowl, and this is the jam." He indicats a pot with a spoon sticking out of it. He glances at Taveth, who is staring at something over Melly's shoulder, and draws the spoon out quickly and puts it neatly in the saucer beside the jampot.

Hanethe shakes some crumbled wintersweet onto her porridge. She had missed it in the East where the fabled endless summer never brings the sweet sap dancing up in the trees with the joy of spring. She takes a mouthful and burns her tongue.

Ferrand comes in smiling. "Any breakfast for the hard-working?" he asks.

"None for the slugabeds," Hodge retorts, their regular morning joke.

Ferrand smiles. Then, becoming aware of the tension in the kitchen, comes forward quickly and puts his hand on Taveth's shoulder. "What's wrong, love?"

She looks up into his face. "Your great-grandmother says she has come to teach yeya to Melly, and she has changed her name from Melibee to Emelis by mother-right."

Ferrand looks swiftly to Hanethe. "The child needs me," she says defensively.

"I want her to teach me," Melly says loudly. "I asked her to."

"Is that why you came?" Ferrand asks, stern now. Hanethe feels at a disadvantage sitting beside Tydsey with a horn spoon in her hand.

"Not by my will, but perhaps the child drew me," she says. "She has strong yeya. She needs what I can teach."

"And her name?"

"Melibee was her grandmother's name," Melly explains. "But I can still be Melly, e-MEL-iss, see? Nothing changes."

"Everything changes," Taveth says weakly. "She has taken you. You are her child now, not mine—with all her talk of meeting the gods at parties."

Hanethe looks at Melly, trying to signal her to be quiet. She sees that it is hopeless to try to win over Taveth when she is in this state.

"I am a child of Applekirk and you are my mother," Melly says, sketching on the air and offering the result to Taveth. Taveth waves it away.

Ferrand looks at Hanethe keenly and ignores the distractions. "Why did you think you came?" he asks.

Hanethe looks around the kitchen—baby Tydsey with porridge all over her face and hands; Hodge listening keenly; Melly glowing with yeya and excitement; Taveth sitting still in shock. Too many people or not enough. It isn't the time for the whole story. But Ferrand has asked. "I incurred the enmity of Agdisdis," she says simply. "I don't think she will pursue me this far. If she did, here in the Marches she'd be far more limited in her options. But you should know that there is a risk in sheltering me."

Ferrand's brow wrinkles. "What could she do?"

"Never fear, Velovis would not lend his lightning," Hanethe says. "She could do much if she could act directly, but here her powers are curbed. Her sphere is marriage and she cannot attack me there, but she might perhaps harm you if she were feeling petty. The other gods would defend you, for you are innocent, and she would know that. She might well send moods against us."

"We will look to our defences there," Taveth says, glancing towards the handful of yeyana dangling at the window.

"She might send a priest to lecture you," Hodge says, looking interested. "Gradior did that with someone who had run away from a battle. He told the priest and the priest came and found him here and told him off and told everyone that he was a coward."

"She'd know I could outyeya and outface any priest, and it would embarrass them without doing more than discommoding me..." Hanethe hesitates, then sighs. "It would be petty

and childish of her, but she *is* petty and childish, so she will probably do it."

"You did not come here intending to take up again the lordship of Applekirk?" Ferrand asks.

"No!" Hanethe is horrified, almost falling off the bench with the strength of her denial. "I laid it down and passed it on. I won't take it up again. You can't make me."

"Nobody wants to make you," Hodge says, leaning over and patting her hand. "They were afraid you wanted to."

"I don't want to," she says, looking into Ferrand's eyes so he would see the truth in what she says.

"Then what will you do?" he asks.

Hanethe feels like a child again under his gaze, but the certainty that she has always felt about her lifelode is gone. "The East is closed to me and my lifelode lay there, such as it was. I will teach Emelis, I have sealed myself to that. If you will let me stay here, I will do that and perhaps make my new lifelode teaching yeya to her and to any other children of Applekirk who would care for it. If not, I will find somewhere nearby to live and some way of keeping myself fed so I can teach her." Her words trip and stumble as she speaks them, against all habit. The heaviness of thought in the Marches is overtaking her again. "Are there empty houses? The village was thinned by the Plague, but has it grown back?"

"Oh yes, you must have lived through the Plague," Ferrand says. "I hadn't quite thought. Yes, the village has grown back."

Hanethe looks at Ferrand and at Taveth, who is looking at Melly. Melly is eating her porridge unconcernedly. It is hard for Hanethe to believe that they hadn't been keeping knowledge from the children—they really had almost forgotten the plague. It has been buried in the dust of years and the event that changed the whole shape of her life is no more than half-remembered history to them. "Yes, I remember it," she says, but no more.

"Do you want to stay here?" Ferrand asks directly, looking straight at her.

"If you will give me shelter knowing that I have Agdigdis's enmity," she says.

Ferrand looks at Taveth, who looks back frowning, but does not speak. He sighs. "There's no denying you belong to Applekirk," he says. "You have the same right here as any child of the manor. Also, we have given you our welcome, though we did so unknowing." Taveth frowns fiercely at this. Hodge's eyes are on his father, his breakfast forgotten. Melly has almost finished her porridge and is scraping the sides of the bowl.

"I welcomed you only as I would anyone," Taveth says. "Ferrand, you didn't tell me what you wanted me to do. It shouldn't be my responsibility."

"I would not hold you to that welcome," Hanethe says.

Ferrand waves a hand, ignoring all this. "What did you do to anger Agdisdis?"

There it is, the question she had not wanted asked. She looks deliberately at the children and up at Ferrand.

"It's complicated," she says. "I will tell you, but this is not the time. It was nothing dishonourable, I will pledge to that."

Taveth makes a little sound in the back of her throat.

Ferrand sighs again and stares at her, biting his lip. "I need to know," he says. "We will give you shelter and any aid we might. You are family, but I need to know. Tell me simply."

"Simply, I stopped her from making a change, a change that would have made the world harder," Hanethe says, fumbling for words, knowing how inadequate it is as an explanation even as she says it.

Nobody understands. Ferrand looks startled, Taveth looks as if she is attending to something off over Hanethe's shoulder. Melly is frowning, Hodge looks pleased. "Well, you can stay," Ferrand says, after a moment. "We certainly have room enough."

8

There are many proverbs in the Marches. There is the one Jankin quotes to Dolkis: "Horses shy, fruit rots, people fall in love." There is one in Darragon that runs: "Never trust a starry sky or a nice arse." In Engleram, when someone has missed the point, they say: "Don't wait for the wind to send you a letter." In Belvede they say: "People and water take the easiest path." In the village west of Marakanda where Jankin grows up his mother frequently tells him: "Before you charm the birds from the trees, better be sure why you want a bird." He never listens. Ranal is fond of saying: "After ploughing, sowing; after sowing, harvest; after harvest, ploughing," meaning that a farmer's work is never done. When the children are upset he says to them: "Every morning a sunrise, every evening a sunset," to show that all things pass. When Ferrand is cross with Kevan, Taveth tells him: "Fire burns wood, but not stone." Hodge likes to tease out the meaning of proverbs sometimes far beyond everyone's patience.

"Well, it never rains but it pours," Taveth says to Ferrand. Her fingers slide along the seam of a pod and ease out the peas to join their fellows in the bowl in her lap. She leans back against the wall of the house and looks up at Ferrand where he stands smiling ruefully in the sunshine.

"Who says it, and what do they mean?" asks Hodge, using his whole hand to dig out a recalcitrant pea stuck in the top of his pod. Taveth can already see in the plump child the man he will be at thirty—stocky, scholarly, and persistent. He drops the pea in the bowl, reaches down into the pile of pods on the step beside Taveth, and begins to split another.

"It means that everything happens at once," Ferrand explains, smiling at Taveth over Hodge's head. "Like in this case. First we heard that Peronel is coming home. Then we get a letter about a scholar arriving from the West. And now Hanethe turns up unexpectedly from the east. All at once, you see?"

"It isn't true," Hodge says, dropping his pea into the bowl. "It might be true this time, but very often things happen one at a time. Besides, it can't be pouring without raining. Rain is what it pours *with*. Unless it can pour snow?"

"It can't pour snow," Ferrand says, distracted at once. "I don't know why not, but it isn't what people say."

"The very idea of snow seems impossible on a day like this," Taveth says. Yet as she looks around at the kitchen garden in the sunshine, the canes heavy with fruit and vegetables, butterflies hovering in the warm air, the stone walls covered with tiny golden flowers—she can all too easily see it buried under snows that had been and snows to come.

"It *never* rains," Hodge says, "But, it pours. No."

"It means it never rains without pouring," Ferrand says, crouching down to put his head on the same level as his son's, meeting his eyes, crumpling the letter he holds in the process. "And in turn, that things all pile up and come on at the same moment, do you see?"

"But it does rain without pouring," Hodge says. "Lots of times. Otherwise we wouldn't need a word for it. And sometimes things pile up and other times they happen one after another. Whoever says that, and you still haven't told me who says it, they're just silly. And besides," he adds, with the air of clinching an argument, "They also say don't make a pie from one bud, which means exactly the opposite."

"He's right," Ferrand says, looking up at Taveth. "He's absolutely right. What can we do with him?"

"Make him lord of the manor in your place, as he's so much better suited to it?" Taveth suggests.

Ferrand laughs and falls back on his heels, jumping up at the last moment to stand upright and blow Taveth a kiss, a trick he learns in the east. For an instant she glimpses the young romantic she falls in love with ten years before, and smiles, remembering. Ferrand's chestnut hair is shorter and streaked with silver and his beard is longer. His waist has thickened and though she doesn't have any reason to doubt his love, he doesn't feel much need to court her these days.

"Don't be so silly," Hodge reproves Taveth.

"You will be lord of the manor one day," she says, taking up another handful of peapods. "It's the lifelode you're born to."

"But not for years and years yet," Hodge says, looking up seriously at Ferrand for reassurance.

"I lost count when I was travelling, but I don't think I can be even fifty yet, let alone ready to die," Ferrand says, looking at Taveth for confirmation.

"Not for a good few years yet," she says, seeing for a moment the portly old man Ferrand becomes, one armed, his hair and beard silver-white. She does not see him dead—that is not her gift and she is glad of it—but she guesses he will live another twenty years. She always knows he is older than she is and now she feels acutely aware of it. Her fingers keep on sliding up the seams of the pods and smoothing down inside to loosen the peas and let them fall into the bowl, almost without thought.

"Well, then," Ferrand says, smiling at Hodge. "Nobody's trying to push it on you early. Taveth was joking and in the way jokes say something true, she was saying how wise you are and what a good lord you will make when the time comes." He leans down and takes a handful of peas from the bowl and puts them in his mouth.

"You'll get stomach-ache," Taveth says automatically, but with no real reproach in her voice. She reaches for more pods and is surprised to see that the pile is done.

"They're good," Ferrand says indistinctly, around the peas. "Try some yourself."

"We already ate some when we started," Hodge says conspiratorially.

"They're so good when they're new," Taveth says, laughing. She looks down at the large pile of green spheres against the unglazed russet of the bowl. "I think we have enough here for supper. I'm not going to start drying the peas yet."

"With all these people coming maybe you should start soon," Ferrand says, straightening the letter guiltily.

"I suppose it would be too much to expect that this scholar would tell us why he's coming or how long he's staying?" Taveth asks, sliding the bowl to her hip and pulling herself to her feet.

Ferrand smoothes the letter against his breeches and reads it again, his brow wrinkling.

"Who is he anyway?" Hodge asks, gathering together the empty pods.

"He's Jankin, a scholar of Marakanda, coming here to investigate the Marisians. It's really hard to make out this writing, more curls and knots than hair that's been slept on wet."

"We'll find room for him, of course," Taveth says, sighing. "What else could we do? We certainly couldn't turn away guests."

"That wouldn't be right," Hodge says.

Taveth meets Ferrand's eyes, where a smile is dancing. "Do you know if Chayra's in her workshop?" Ferrand asks. "I ought to tell her about this."

"Mother went to the village," Hodge says. "She said she'd be back for dinner. And she won't do anything about it, that's Taveth's work, not hers."

When Jankin comes, Hodge is his first champion, but none of them have any idea how much trouble he can make in their smoothly arranged lives.

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On his first morning in Applekirk, Jankin wakes unusually early, braids his hair with his fingers, goes downstairs hungry, and finds the kitchen deserted. As he stands wondering what to do the door opens and Ranal comes in, a dripping bucket in each hand.

"Good morning," Jankin says, and bows.

"You're timely about your work," Ranal says, smiling and setting the buckets down under the counter. "Or were you planning to help in the fields today?"

"I don't know what help a city man might be, but I do know harvest needs all hands, so I'm prepared to turn mine to what needs doing," Jankin says.

Ranal takes a dipper from the table and fills two cups with water. "That's the spirit," he says, handing one of them to Jankin. "Do you know anything about sheep?"

Jankin sips, considering. "I know they were distinguished from goats by the Marisians, some say by magic and others by simple breeding. I know they began in Maris and went out eastwards from there, that the best sheep and the best wool now come from a little west of here, especially the Margam hills. I know where they're likely to be found, and I know how to judge an uncured skin for parchment. I know their flesh makes good eating, and I know a recipe or two. Beyond that, almost nothing. But I'm always ready to learn."

Ranal drains his cup and sets it down. "Well, it's more than I expected."

"You thought I'd ask weren't they those white things on the hills?" Jankin is already feeling a little tired of being thought a city idiot. "I was born in a village in the Westmarch. We have different crops and different animals, but my father still farms." He does not say that he fled that life as soon as he could.

Ranal laughs. "Come out and look at a sheep with me," he says. Jankin finds it an incredible suggestion, but he follows him out of the kitchen into the cool dewy sunshine of the early morning. They go through the kitchen garden, through

another garden, and into a large meadow, with a barn, enclosed by a palisade. A single horned sheep is rubbing its head against the wooden stakes. Ranal stops at the palisade and looks down into the meadow. A tiny creeper is growing along the palisade with flowers like little purple bells.

"That seems a large field for one sheep," Jankin says.

"It's where we over-winter them. It snows on the hills and here too, but if they're all together here we can feed them. Then they lamb down here in early spring and go back up to the hills when the grass greens again. The sheep of the whole village over-winter here, not just ours. That's why they call lords 'sheepshit', have you ever heard that?"

Jankin hasn't, but he's quick, as always. "Because they benefit from all the manure?"

"That's right. Growing up we called our lord 'sheepshit' as often as 'lord'. I'll say it to Ferrand now and then, teasing, but he doesn't mind it." He gives Jankin a strange sideways look.

"That's very good of him," Jankin says.

"Yes, well. Look at that ram. I brought him down because he didn't look well and I think I was right. He's moving his head as if he isn't happy."

"Perhaps he just wants to go back to the others in the hills?" Jankin ventures, looking at the ram, which looks like a sheep to him, close-covered in wool.

"He'd be looking for a way out if that was it. I think he has a fever. You don't know about fevers of beasts?"

"A lot, but nothing useful," Jankin says, wondering why Ranal has really brought him out.

"You know the five things we get from sheep?" Ranal asks.

Jankin thinks for a moment. Meat, wool, parchment, and manure are all obvious, but what was the fifth? He looks at the beast in front of him, tightly curled yellowish wool, small dim eyes, curled horns. Surely those horns aren't good for much? "I know four," he says, cautiously, and names them.

"Milk," Ranal says. "Only in the spring when they lamb, but good milk at a bad time, at the end of the snows when there isn't much food."

"Milk," Jankin repeats, looking at the creature, whose ancestors were created by the Marisians by some process he would have liked to understand. He knows goats well, with their thin hair and strong-tasting meat, beards, sure feet, and bright curious slanted eyes. How could anyone make this docile meat-animal from that? It seems almost a desecration. "We milk goats all spring and summer in the Westmarch," he says.

"Goats," Ranal says, expressing more disgust in the one word than Jankin does in an ordinary month. Jankin looks up in surprise and sees Ranal looking at him. "I did want to bring you out here on our own so I could say something," Ranal says, then hesitates and looks back at the sheep. "I saw you looking at the women yesterday, anyone would, and I can see it's your way and no harm in it. Besides, it's their choice to look back or not. But Taveth spoke to me last night about you." He pauses. "She doesn't often take a fancy to someone, Taveth, not like Chayra, who takes more fancies than the sheep take fevers. Chayra almost always has a lover outside the family, man or woman, anyone who'll speak sweetly to her. She isn't shy. Taveth can be shy, well, not shy, but she doesn't put herself forward. She doesn't think, well..."

Jankin's neck prickles with discomfort and he feels sweat starting beneath his arms. He wishes he'd never left his safe room in Marakanda, that he was sitting behind a wall of books and that the nearest he'd ever come to a sheep was the parchment where he was writing. "Are you asking me to leave your women alone?" he asks, when the silence seems to be stretching too long.

"Nothing like that," Ranal says, unexpectedly clapping him hard on the shoulder. "I'm just saying that if you're looking at the two of them, Chayra and Taveth, well, Chayra has a lot of lovers, but Taveth doesn't often like anyone outside the fam-

ily enough to start thinking that way. But you she likes, so it would make her happy if you chose her, and maybe a little sad if you chose Chayra. I expect I'm putting this very badly and maybe it should be Ferrand who has this conversation with you, but he wouldn't do it, and Taveth, well, she's taken with you, but if she thinks you prefer Chayra than she's not one to come and tug on your hair to let you know."

"I see," says Jankin, as he sorts all this out. Images of the women swim in his mind for a moment. Taveth's ripe dark body, Chayra's slim fair one. They are both lovely, but then Jankin knows he finds almost all women lovely. The thought that they both want him makes him feel a little drunk. Then, like rain down his neck he remembers Dolkis. Dolkis is hateful, and in the morning sunshine he has no desire to gratify her, only to prevent her using his oath to ruin him. "Thank you for talking to me," he says to Ranal. "We'll sort it out."

"Taveth will be in the kitchen by now making breakfast," Ranal says. He bends over the palisade and rumples the wool on the sheep's head as if feeling for something.

"What are you going to do about this sheep?"

"Oh, give him a herb and get Melly to give him a word, that's what I usually do. I didn't really think you'd know anything useful." Ranal smiles up at Jankin innocently.

Jankin opens his mouth to reply, then realizes he can't say any of the things that came quickly to his tongue. "Gah!" he says, and Ranal laughs, and after a moment Jankin laughs with him.

Applekirk remembers Jankin best laughing.

It is true that Chayra and Taveth are both attracted to Jankin. The afternoon before Ranal speaks to him, Chayra comes back from the fields when the bread is baking in the oven. She looks hot and harried. She takes off the big straw hat she always wears

for harvesting and fans herself with it. "What a day," she says, collapsing onto the kitchen chair.

"You look exhausted," Taveth says, handing her a mug of cool water.

"I need more than a mug," she says, draining it nevertheless. "I've drawn up a bucket, will you…?"

"Of course," Taveth says, setting down a bunch of radishes. "This can wait."

"I'll help you when I'm clean," Chayra says, picking up the dish of soap from the windowsill and leading the way outside. Gumble, the fat white cat, follows them out, wreathing around Taveth's ankles.

"Did you get much done?" Taveth asks.

"Ferrand says they'll be down there another hour today and then it should be finished in only two more days like today," Chayra replies as they go through the arch into the little courtyard where the well stands. "So that's some relief. And for a little more, well, did you see the newcomer?" She laughs.

"Jankin?" Taveth asks, with elaborately casual ease, though her tongue already delights in the syllables of his name.

"Yes, and isn't he smooth!" Chayra says, setting down the soap and stripping off her smock and the smalls she wears under it. Where she usually keeps herself covered, Chayra's skin is almost the colour of a peach.

"Smooth enough to lick summersweet off the bees," Taveth says, another proverb, picking up the waiting bucket of water as Chayra unbinds her hair.

"I wouldn't mind licking summersweet off him myself, mmmmm, delicious," Chayra says, pursing her lips.

Taveth smiles, and pours half the water over her. Chayra shrieks, and then laughs. Gumble flees back to the kitchen garden, ears down and tail fluffed up like a fir cone. "Now let me soap," Chayra says, pulling off a handful of the soap, which has a consistency like mashed turnips, and rubbing herself vigorously with it. "Did Jankin go wild with compliments for you?"

"He did, and I found myself quite melted by him," Taveth admits, giggling a little.

"Oh, me too, melted like candlewax into a little puddle at his feet." Chayra giggles too, and a fourteen-year-old shadow peeps out to join her, waving her arms in a mock spiral dance.

"Was he doing that with everyone?" Taveth asks, a chill of doubt touching her. Had he meant what he said or was it cold courtesy? No, she is sure he means it. Hodge had pushed him into honesty, and Calva bless him for it, however embarrassed she had been.

"Everyone, right down to toothless old Gran Jehann, who's probably old enough to be his great-grandmother." They giggle together at the thought. "He does have some taste though, he didn't flirt at all with Hanethe, bowing when they were introduced and then looking away as if she made him uneasy."

"Maybe he could sense the yeya," Taveth says, sobered. "Or maybe he knows something about her?"

"How could he, when he's come from the West and she came from the East?" Chayra points out reasonably, rubbing the soap into her long hair where it was matted with sweat and the dirt of harvesting.

"You're right," Taveth says. "Ready for the rest of this?"

"Not so fast this time," Chayra says. Taveth pours the water smoothly and the lather runs off to soak into the thirsty ground.

"Need another bucket?"

"Not worth it." Chayra sluices the last of the water over her feet. "I'll be harvesting again tomorrow. When it's all over I'll go and swim in the river, then heat water for a proper bath and soak my hair in chamomile and rosemary, to feel like a lord's wife again—or even to feel like a human being again."

Taveth picks up the bundle of clothes. "Remember the ambule of Bendic we had once who thought dirt was holy?"

Chayra laughs. "I remember how filthy he was, and how disgusting. Remember how tempting Hodge found the idea?"

"I soon persuaded him out of that one," Taveth says. "Do you want to put these back on?",

"Velovis no! I'll wear them tomorrow, but I want to put on something clean now. I'll do as I am until I get in, the sun can dry me."

"And maybe Gislain will drop by," Taveth teases as they walk back towards the kitchen.

"Or maybe Jankin will come back from the fields," Chayra says, sticking her breasts out, giggling.

Taveth nods to the kitchen door, which opens with an enthusiastic bang. Chayra runs upstairs to dress while Taveth draws the bread out of the oven and sets it to cool. She takes up her sharp knife and begins to slice radishes thinly, sliding the cool red-rimmed circles into the wooden bowl as each is done.

9

Agdisdis's first move against Hanethe comes west on the wind in the middle of harvest. Taveth is in the kitchen kneading dough. She still feels angry with Hanethe for stealing Melly, and with Ferrand for letting Hanethe stay after such an inadequate explanation of why she has come back. Everyone else is out in the barley field and she looks up from the dough and sighs. The afternoon sunlight dances on the tiles. Just like every year, the promise that she would have some help in the kitchen during harvest has proved empty. It bothers her more than usual this year. She knows why, of course, and thumps the dough harder than it needed. Hanethe. If Kevan were to say there were too many adults in the family now, Taveth would have had a hard time disagreeing. Hanethe is so proud and overbearing, treating Taveth almost like a servant, indeed far worse than Taveth treats the village people who come in from time to time to help. Taveth has never in her life done anything, not a single thing, that she considers half as bad as what Hanethe has done in stealing Melly.

She feels tears pressing behind her eyes and stops still. It is not at all like her to weep for such a cause. She straightens and stands a moment as if listening, aware of the flour that coats her arms to the elbows, the slight stickiness of her palms, the cool stone beneath her bare feet, and the heat of the kitchen. There is no sound but her breathing, save the repetitive trilling of a goldwarbler outside the window. Knowing yourself through your senses helps against most yeya. Are those her own thoughts? She does resent Hanethe—how could she help

it—but where is her perspective? What might that anger lead to? There is definitely outside pressure on her resentment. Taveth drops her jaw as if to yawn and draws it up hard to bite on her upper lip.

She takes a damp cloth laid ready on the table and moves it through the air to warm it. She wipes her hands and her arms clean of flour, then settles the now-cool cloth over the dough. She can leave it to rise now for the third time. There will be leaven bread for dinner and for tomorrow's fieldmeal. Six loaves, she thinks deliberately, browned and evenly risen, made of the finest rye and barley meal, six loaves to feed her family and please the harvesters. The thought, which would usually have delighted her, gives her only the faintest sense of satisfaction. Sourness and resentment rise against them all—the harvesters, who complain about the itchiness of the barley and the difficulty of stooking, but who would not spare an hour to help out in the kitchen—and her family, who welcomed the stranger, the cuckoo, the child-stealer, Hanethe.

Taveth draws a deliberate deep breath to centre herself in her body and walks to the window. She looks at the yeyana hanging there—a blue-and-black stone twisted about with filigree silver, a bundle of herbs bound with a faded pink ribbon, a hair plait, a smoke-coloured stone marked with yeyan signs, a blue glass ball set with one eye, and the tiny silver figure of a unicorn with glittering crystal eyes. Beneath them on the sill is an unbroken line of stones, different sizes and colours laid carefully next to each other, leaving no gap.

Looking at them calms her and helps her know her feelings. She should speak to Hanethe about the real causes of resentment—it could be a danger. Not that Hanethe would necessarily listen. Taveth treats her with the politeness due to one of Ferrand's great-grandmothers, but she seems to think Taveth is of no importance at all. There are stories about how wives behave to sweetmates when their husbands bring them home to share a house, demanding services of them. In the stories the

husband is of course bound to support his wife and the sweetmate suffers. Taveth's mother repeated them when Ferrand arranged his marriage with Chayra, and Taveth laughed. Now Hanethe is behaving just like the wife in those stories, and Ferrand takes her side, saying that Taveth does for the rest of the family whatever it is that Hanethe demands. It is true, but the rest of the family do not take Taveth's services for granted. They like her, they treat her as an equal. They think of what she does as part of what she brings to the family, not as services that are their right to demand and her obligation to provide. Hanethe...another wave of external bitterness sweeps through Taveth. She will have to talk to Hanethe about it whether Hanethe likes it or not.

She rearranges the yeyana a little. The unicorn feels the most powerfully protective. She twirls it in her fingers. Ferrand brought it back from Belvede. It has a twin griffin which hangs in Ferrand's bedroom—the other rooms have only wooden animals for yeyana. She pulls out one of her fine springy black hairs and winds it tightly around the unicorn's foot. She realizes at once that she should make a fresh herb bundle—this one is old, the strength goes out of it with time, and she has plenty of herbs. She is pleased at the thought of something that might be of practical help. Every window and door in the house has a herb bundle. She can renew them all. Then tonight she must speak first to Ferrand and then to Hanethe. Ferrand is tired because of helping with the harvest, but this is sufficiently important to disturb him.

The thin brindled cat, Bodkin, lies asleep on the stairs in a patch of sunlight coming through the window of the sewing room above, his white belly exposed for once. The kitchen stairs are too wide for Taveth to step over him to the next as she goes up, so she sets one foot beside him, careful not to disturb him.

There is a skein of red ribbon, more than she needs, in the linen cupboard at the top of the stairs. The starch-and-laven-

der-scented order of the linen closet does as much to restore Taveth as the yeyana. This, with the kitchen, is the heart of her lifelode. Here are sheets and towels and clothes, made and unmade, winter blankets, a clear space where harvest smocks would wait again for next harvest, all clean and pressed and set in folded order. Here she can understand that Hanethe is like Kevan, trying to feel her place in the family, pushing to see where it might be. One of her most frequently seen shadows is a prickly frowning adolescent with short hair. It is that Hanethe Taveth needs to speak to, to bring home if she can. She needs to help her feel where she can belong in the family without disturbing the rest of them, and Taveth in particular. Melly—she touches Melly's thick winter cloak. Purple, Melly had wanted, and then she cried when the wool came out as dark as blackberry juice. Melly is still her daughter. Nobody could take her away. She needs to spend a little time alone with her being her mother. It will all work out, she tells herself.

Back in the kitchen, having once more avoided the hazard of the cat, she leaves the table to the rising bread and sorts the herbs on the counter. In her newfound clarity, she thinks it might be as well to warn the village. Every house hangs yeyana in the windows to keep off moods sweeping in from the East, as impersonal as weather, and sometimes as bad to be caught up in. Even so it might be polite to let them know that aimed attacks might be coming. Taveth twists a hair into the difficult shape of protection and ties it to the meadowsweet, avoiding the prickly teasle. Perhaps she should make herb bundles for all the village. She has ribbon enough and it is summer, she can replenish her herbs. She can take them around or have the children do it. It might be as well to ask Ferrand first, the house is her business but the village is his. She begins to sing as she twists the ribbon.

Chayra, returning from the harvest field, is affected too.

"I think Hanethe must be the most awkward conversationalist between Belvede and Petchverry," Taveth says.

"I'm sure she does it on purpose," Chayra replies.

Taveth looks at her evenly, considering. Chayra isn't often that sharp. "Come over to the yeyana and repeat that," she says.

Chayra frowns but draws herself up and marches over to the window. After a moment she touches the fresh herb-bundle and sighs. "Most of it is Hanethe genuinely being infuriating, whatever else."

"I know. She drives me wild. We need to talk to her about it. She reminds me of Kevan in some ways."

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Before they can talk to her, and before Taveth can take new yeyana to the village, Dolkis and the wind between them stir up the villagers. After the dining room door gives the alarm, Taveth takes the children into the kitchen and begins to mix the batter for galettes. The others go out past the offices and the judgement room into the twilight. It seems a strange time for any callers. The first flashflies are blinking on under the trees, blue and gold and pink and silver. Hanethe has no idea who could have attacked. She doesn't know the political situation, but that is because nobody has been talking about it, the way they would if they'd been worried at all. She wonders if it might be Agdisdis come with an army out of the East. She dismisses the possibility. Away from the East, they would speak with many voices and it would weaken her too much for many to leave. Besides, as time runs between here and the East, there has hardly been any time.

"Why didn't the gate challenge me?" Jankin asks. His voice sounds completely different without the usual confident tone. He could have been Hodge's age.

"The gate knew you were invited and didn't mean to hurt us," Ferrand says and grins, his white teeth flashing in the half light. "The gate isn't very bright, we get alarms like this now and then, it's probably nothing much. Don't be afraid. Even if

it should be something, they can't come at us. These weapons are very much just in case."

Hanethe has fought here twice before, just like this, with the gate giving the alarm. Once in Spring, raiders, driven to desperation by the plague, and the other time in Autumn, an armed party of neighbours planning to marry her by force and take Applekirk. They fight them off both times. Adoun organizes them, telling them where to go. He is good at that, decisive. She sees some of the same in Ferrand now and tries not to flinch from it.

"First we find out what's going on," Chayra says, when they are almost at the wall. "Ranal, stay by the gate. If there's trouble we'll be coming down, you can rely on it. The rest of you come up."

"I'll talk first," Ferrand says.

"First and last, nobody will get past the defences," Chayra says, and turns on her heel to kiss him briefly.

Hanethe follows Ferrand up the narrow stair to the top of the gatehouse, Gislain at her heels. They have put some kind of wooden rail along the wall since she was last here. It is too dark to see it properly, but it makes it much easier to climb than the bare dressed stone it had been in her day.

Once on top of the gate, they can see down. The invaders are carrying torches, and by the flickering light they can see pitchforks, scythes, and mattocks. Farmers, as Ranal said, but a mob of them, roused up somehow. They seemed so friendly in the fields. Well, Hanethe thinks, this is what comes of letting them be too familiar. Never in her day had they come to the gates like this—they had known who their lord was, known and respected.

"Who comes in arms to Applekirk?" Ferrand asks, his voice booming out the formal challenge. He squints down and changes his tone completely. "Oh, it's not an invading army, the gate misinformed me and I picked up a sword not realising it was my neighbours come to call. How do you, neighbours, been drinking and only half-way through harvest?"

The farmers laugh a little, shuffle their feet, and someone steps forward. It is too dark to see who it is. The torchlight glints on very dark naked skin, on a yeyana—a priest? Oh no, Hanethe thinks, no!

Hanethe leans forward and spreads her hand, drawing the yeya to light up the scene as bright as day, but shadowless. Yes, a priest, with a carved silkwood yeyana. Nobody Hanethe knows, but she is looking up with hatred in her eyes. The crowd murmurs and steps back, jostling each other, clearly afraid. Perhaps they had expected their faces to be covered by the night. Those with torches look at them in surprise to see them paled by the yeyan light. The priest unfortunately doesn't waver.

"I am Dolkis, ambule priest of Agdisdis, and I come here to ask you, Ferrand, Lord Applekirk, to cast out the wrongdoer you have taken into your home, as is the wish of the people of Applekirk."

Ferrand frowns at Hanethe. She grimaces and spreads her hands, and at once the yeyan light vanishes, casting them all back into shadows and torchlight. The crowd cries out in surprise.

"Don't be such a fool, Hanethe!" Ferrand mutters, and pushes her back.

She turns to him, startled, but he is already leaning out over the parapet. Chayra takes her arm. She cannot see the scene below, only Ferrand's back as he leans out.

"What wrongdoer would that be?" Ferrand asks, softening his voice and broadening his vowels as the farmers do. "I'm a happily married man and I can't think of ought I've done that would anger Agdisdis, not today any road."

A nervous laugh comes from the crowd, but Dolkis cuts through it. "You know that the wrongdoer I seek is the one who calls herself Hanethe."

The crowd murmurs at that. Hanethe is about to get up again to speak, but Chayra whispers in her ear, "Let Ferrand handle this. He's good at it."

"What, my granny?" Ferrand asks, managing to sound surprised. "Well, she's been away East and she has funny ways, but I haven't heard that she's a notable wrongdoer."

"She has—" Dolkis begins in an accusing tone, but Ferrand does not give her a space to speak.

"This is not the time," he says loudly, his voice now hard. "Nor is it the habit of the manor of Applekirk to have justice done by a mob at the gates. I am the magistrate here and I would no more protect my grandmother against the might of the law than I would any other wrongdoer. But equally I would no more yield her up to your bare demand than I would the least of my neighbours here. Accusations without proof are easy, and any lord who lets them stand opens the door to malice and false complaint. If you have a genuine case against Hanethe, bring it to the court and I will hear it."

"Your court? Your grandmother? And what hope of justice—" Dolkis begins.

"No, can't say fairer than that," one of the farmers says. Hanethe looks at Chayra, who is smiling.

"Bring it all out in court, when he hears what all you've told us he'll agree for sure, even though she is his granny," another says. Hanethe smiles bitterly at their gullibility.

"When will you next hold court?" Dolkis demands. "Tomorrow?"

Ferrand laughs and the farmers laugh with him. "We're in the middle of harvest," Ferrand says, and the farmers echo him. "Two more days in the fields, and I'll not hold court on the third day, for that is our harvest festival and I'll not disappoint Benoit's Marjorane who will be grain queen this year and lead the dancing." There is a ragged cheer from the farmers at this. "Then the day after is a holiday, Mitra's day, and the solemn end of harvest, so we'll all take ourselves and our sore heads to the nemet for shriving and thanksgiving, where we will doubtless see you along with our own priests. The day after that, the fifth day from now, I will hold court, and you can bring what

case you will against my grandmother Hanethe, and those who would see justice done may come and witness."

"Very well," Dolkis says, though it sounds as if she finds it anything but well. Hanethe smiles in triumph, but sees that Chayra now is frowning.

Jankin behaves well enough during the alarm, holding his borrowed blade ready. Afterward he keeps looking at Ferrand sideways, when he thinks nobody will notice. He had thought, he had honestly thought, that the men of Applekirk were dull compared to the women. Ferrand totally surprises him. Courage could have almost been expected, in a man like that, the lord of the manor confronted by a torch-waving mob. Jankin has seen such courage before, and has seen it cut down. What surprises him is the imagination and wit it took to stand up and talk like that, and talk them down. True, Ferrand knows them, is in fact the neighbour he says he is. He lives on the land, as they do. All the same, to speak no word of reproach, to bring them around, to joke, to outface Dolkis when she has them at her back, Dolkis of all people—Jankin has never seen anything like it. He feels useless. He feels he did nothing but stand like a dolt, peering over the parapet, holding his borrowed sword awkwardly, not sure he could use it, aware that although he is their guest he has already been forced into service with their enemy.

Ferrand slips an arm around Chayra as they leave the gatehouse stairs. He looks no different than before, save for the extra shadows the starlight casts, just any rustic lord, butt of a thousand jokes in Marakanda. "Did you hear?" he asks Ranal as they come out into the air.

"Well enough," Ranal says. "Enough to hear you sending them away quietly. Whoever was that priest?"

"Dolkis, ambule priest of Agdisdis, she named herself," Gislain answers. "She was not at the glebehouse this morning." They turn to walk back under the dark trees towards the house.

"Gislain, my thanks to you, I could tell you had an arrow on the string all through that and it helped me speak easily," Ferrand says, clapping the priest on her bare shoulder.

"It was what any guest would do," Gislain replies, looking in courtesy at Jankin, who bows automatically. "As for Dolkis, I've never heard of her either, which is strange, and the more I think of it the stranger it is. She wasn't due here. I don't leave for more than another month and when I do it'll be a priest of Velovis who replaces me. Applekirk is not such a big place that it needs three priests at a time, nor is there really room for another in Timot's glebehouse."

"She's clearly come after Hanethe, probably by divine order," Ferrand says.

"She can't do anything to me," Hanethe says, her chin high.

"She might not be able to do anything directly, but she can very easily make our neighbours so unhappy you are here that you'll have to leave," Chayra says.

"If I am to be judged by farmers and ignorant villagers—" Hanethe begins, a note of hysteria in her voice.

"You'll be judged by me in court, but it must appear to be fair in everyone's sight or Dolkis will be able to appeal over my head to my good lord, the Lord Engleram. You can be sure his judgement will not care whose great-grandmother you are." Ferrand sighs.

"In court, she'll be under oath," Ranal says. "That will affect what lies she'll be able to tell."

Jankin thinks this reflects a touching faith in Dolkis's honesty, which he does not share.

"I will attend, and I am sure Timot will come too, to make sure her oath binds her," Gislain says. "If she were to lie, it would be a matter for the whole organization of the Nemet, not for Agdisdis."

"I have yeya enough to do that myself," Hanethe says.

"It would be much better for someone else to do it, someone who is not accused and has standing here. Thank you for your

kind offer, Gislain dear," Chayra says, taking Gislain's hand in hers. Jankin blinks. He has misunderstood all the relationships in the family and imagines that Hodge had said that Gislain was Taveth's sweetheart, but as she seems happy to accept this from Chayra he rearranges his ideas. He smiles in the darkness at Dolkis's naïvety in thinking he could disrupt this marriage. These people's love-lives seem already quite sufficiently complicated without any intervention of his own.

When Ranal opens the kitchen door, they are greeted by a marvellous smell of hot cakes and wintersweet with a tang of something fruity and unfamiliar.

"We saved some for you because Taveth insisted," Hodge says. He is shaken by the gates closing, but he speaks evenly. Ferrand, recognising the effort his son is making, sits down beside Hodge and puts an arm around him.

"There's plenty for everyone," Taveth says. "Go back to the dining room and I'll bring them in."

"But you were eating in here," Gislain protests. "We can all eat in the kitchen."

Taveth's eyes meet Jankin's, shyly, as if having taken a step towards him she now needs to hide behind something. He finds it charming. "We shouldn't really eat in the kitchen when we have guests," she says. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not, lady," he says, and bows deeply. "I'll just set down this borrowed blade and then I'll be glad to eat in your kitchen."

"Good thought, Jankin," Chayra says. "All weapons to the rack, everyone, no setting them down and forgetting them in the excitement of galettes." She takes Gislain's bow. Ferrand and Ranal hand Jankin their swords, and he follows Chayra up the passage to the dining room.

The larder door swings open as they pass it, Chayra kicks it shut impatiently. "Speaking of excitement," Jankin hears Taveth begin, behind them.

10

Everyone helps with the harvest, except Taveth, who stays at home and cooks.

"What are you going to do today, Jankin?" Chayra asks brightly at breakfast. She is wearing her harvesting smock, but has taken the trouble to twine butterflowers through her braid.

"I thought I'd lend a soft and untutored hand with the harvest," Jankin says, smiling over at Ranal.

"We can always use another pair of hands at harvest, however soft they might be," Ranal replies. Taveth feels wonderfully fond of them both, seeing them teasing each other. She catches Ferrand looking at her with furrowed brows and laughs, shaking her head.

"Just raensome," she says.

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The worst of harvest for everyone is the way the barley itches.

"It's so nice to feel fresh again." Chayra says after bathing. "I always forget how hot it gets. And the barley gets inside my smock and itches everywhere, and of course I know I shouldn't scratch, but even as I was telling the children not to I caught myself doing it. And then dear Hanethe had to draw everyone's attention to it, saying that it's not the barley that itches, it's a barley mite. I asked her if there was yeya to keep them off and would you believe there isn't, but there's yeya that makes you—no, *one*, only Hanethe would say *one* that way—not mind itching so much, but she fears it might be a long hard lesson for me to learn."

Taveth snorts.

The children love the harvest field, even baby Tydsey, who Ranal carries, astonishing Hanethe. "Didn't it make you tired, working all day with Tydsey on your back?" she asks at dinner, amazed at his stamina, for Tydsey is not light.

"I'm used to it. It doesn't make me tired. And it makes little Tyds feel she's helping. Lots of the villagers do the same. I did it with all our children when they were babies." He smiles at her, shyly, through his beard. "I like babies. Perhaps it's because my lifelode is farming, and they are like calves or lambs or piglets. I missed having them about the place when the others started to grow up. I almost always take Tydsey with me in the afternoon. Sometimes she sleeps and sometimes if I'm in the barn I'll put her down to sit in the straw. She's learning about growing things and animals already. She's not quite crawling yet, but when she is we'll see something." He frowns. "Or she may not crawl. Kevan didn't, he just went straight from sitting to pulling himself up to walking." Kevan, sitting opposite, frowns and looks down at his plate. He wants no reminders of his childhood.

Hanethe does not enjoy the harvest, though she works at it. When Taveth says she will make yeyana for the villagers, Hanethe jumps at the chance to leave the fields and help.

"I think it would be best if you were in the harvest field helping today," Ferrand says, regarding his great-grandmother gently. "If you stay in the house it might seem as if you were hiding. The best thing is if everyone gets used to you as you are—an ordinary innocent old woman." Hanethe winces and draws herself even more tightly together. Taveth, unasked, refills the tisane at her elbow. "That in itself will do much to disprove what Dolkis has said against you, if they can see that you are out there with them, helping like everyone else. It will make it harder for Dolkis to stir them up if they think of you as my granny, not a sinister evildoer."

There is a word they use in the East, 'grubbers', to refer to those whose lifelode arises from the soil. Hanethe does not let it pass her lips. After all, she is out in the field here specifically to win friends and prevent this particular parcel of grubbers from forming a mob and tearing her apart in their own rough justice. All the same, as the last day of harvest wears on, it keeps coming into her mind. Here she is, grubbing among the grubbers. Cutting barley is backbreaking work; step, bend, sweep, gather, pass. Step, bend, sweep, gather, pass; endlessly. Sweat gathers, dust sticks to sweat, and itching bearded grains of barley work their way inside smocks and rub tender skin raw. It is hard, for one who knows how much more there could be in the world. It is all too easy to let herself slip back into that Eastern frame of mind, to despise the people she works among and herself for helping them.

It is not as if they are grateful. She remembers, as she thrusts a gathered sheaf into the hands of the youngster behind, the harvest after the plague. Young Hanethe cuts and cuts, her legs trembling at every step, not daring to shut her aching eyes for a minute in case she falls asleep in the field. At her side is the pitiful remnant of the village, many still shaking from fever, all weak and worn to the bone—the ancestors, no doubt, of today's plump smiling grubbers. They all understand then what famine could mean, after plague, and still they cannot gather it all before the rains come slashing down to break the crop. The rain runs down their despairing faces and young Hanethe slumps over her scythe among them, defeated.

The smiling youngster beside Hanethe tosses her head and binds a sheaf with stalks and sets it with the rest. Hanethe sees her, but she also sees those rains so long ago. In the summerlands, when she wanted to think kindly of Applekirk she brought up a childhood image of sunrise on snow, her family making their way to the nemet on a festival day, before the plague came. This hot barleyfield is too much reminder of what she has tried not to think about.

"Do you need a rest?" Ferrand asks, beside her, bringing her mind back.

"No, but you're very kind," she says, biting her lip and trying to smile.

She steps and bends, the scythe heavy in her hand. Ferrand is kind. They all are. She knows she should not have brought herself and her troubles back here. They have accepted her as kin and spoken for her against Dolkis. She had not thought Agdisdis would pursue her to this extent. Why seek revenge, why not let it go? What good could it do? The world is in the hands of the gods, as always. Hanethe is what Ferrand says, just a harmless old woman grubbing in a field. She did not think Agdisdis would care so much, though she knew Agdisdis's mind. There must be something she does not know. She will ask Emelis if she can see the pattern. It is Melly who holds her here now. If not for Melly, she could leave and take her troubles with her.

"Stop there," Ferrand says. "This is the patch we leave for the grain queen to cut. You go and have a drink, you look hot and tired."

"It is hot work," Hanethe says.

She sets off across the stubble, stumbling here and there on the uneven ground, smiling as best she can at the gleaners as she passes them. They work quite a distance behind the harvesters, taking up any ears of barley that are missed, or even individual grains that have fallen. It always amazes her that there is anything left to glean, but the gleaners' baskets are half full. They are mostly women and children. Gleaning the manor lands is part of the corrody of widows and their families. There are a few elderly men among them, Hanethe notes, which there would not have been in her day, but she sees little harm in extending the privilege.

"Going to wet your mouth, granny?" one woman asks as she passes by.

"That's right," Hanethe says.

"If you see my Nolly, hurry him along so I can wet mine," she says.

"I will," Hanethe says, with no idea who her Nolly might be.

She stumps on through the gleaners and at last gains the shade of the tree where the buckets of water stand, yeyan words set on them to keep them cool and sweet.

There is a handful of other harvesters refreshing themselves. Two young men are teasing each other. An older man is carefully rearranging a wet cloth over his bald head. An old woman is frankly asleep in the shade, her mouth open despite the flies. A little boy is carrying a cup of water back towards the gleaners, carefully, using both hands. She hopes that is the gleaner's Nolly. None of them take any notice of Hanethe. She draws her own drink. The first drops of cool water on her parched tongue taste better than any wine or cordial. She drains the cup and refills it.

As she takes her first sip of the second cup she sees Jankin coming down the lane field carrying a bucket of water dangling from each hand with no yoke, as if they weigh as little as neckscarves. She considers abandoning her water and heading back to the field, but the water wins over her desire to avoid the westerner. He has found a way out of the harvest field, helping Taveth, she thinks. He probably despises the grubbers as much as she does, Hanethe believes that scholars always despise grubbers. He should be out here with the rest of them—it would do him no good to make them see that he thinks himself too good for them. He does have the decency to grunt when he sets the buckets down.

"Ah, Hanethe," he says, using her name as if he had a right to it. "Would you mind touching this with yeya to keep it sweet and cool?"

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Hanethe asks grumpily. Until she spoke, she had been holding a mouthful of water in her mouth, cooling her tongue deliciously. Holding it there

refreshs her in a different way from swallowing it down. She has to swallow it to answer him and blames him for it.

"I don't know yeya," he says ingenuously. "I'm from Marakanda. I don't know if any will develop now I'm here, but none has so far."

"You could live here until you're a hundred and never learn a single thing," Hanethe says. She moves her hands over the buckets, drawing the symbols that will keep them good, and she adds another which will keep the insects away.

"That's interesting," Jankin says. "Do you mean if you taught me the design you just used," he waves his hands in the air meaninglessly, "it would do nothing for the water?"

"You could get all the patterns right and nothing would happen unless you know how to draw on yeya," Hanethe says. "And you need to learn that young or you don't learn it at all."

"So if I'd come here from Marakanda as a child I could have learned it?" he persists.

"Maybe." Hanethe looks at him. He seems as eager as a puppy and as persistent as a swarm of bees. "Look, I appreciate that there isn't anybody here for you to flirt with right now, but you don't have to go out of your way to make conversation with an old woman. Just get on with what you're supposed to be doing and let me get back to my scythe."

Jankin rocks back on his heels. Hanethe is hard to charm, and to Jankin she seems half-demented, but this astonishes him. "Is that what you really think?" he asks. "Why no, Hanethe, I'm really interested in yeya and the differences in place."

"You're really interested in everything," Hanethe growls ungraciously.

Jankin laughs. "Why, yes, it so happens that I am, but I really am, and besides, this is something I've been wondering about. Please tell me."

"I don't know why I should," Hanethe says. She dips another cup of water. Something he'd been wondering about, indeed.

"Sit down," Jankin urges, dropping to the ground and patting the space beside him.

Hanethe lowers herself reluctantly. "I should go back," she says.

"No, stay a moment and tell me about yeya."

Hanethe gives in. "Everyone is born with yeya—at least that's what they say in Applekirk. In the East they say that in the farthest West, where the people aren't much more than moving dolls or statues living their lives through rituals, there are people born entirely without yeya who aren't really people at all. But Marakanda isn't quite that far West or you wouldn't have an Academie there or as much curiosity as you do—though maybe you got the share of curiosity for the whole city."

"Maybe I did," Jankin says. "I was born a little way west of Marakanda in a little village. I certainly felt as if I'd got the whole village's worth of curiosity, growing up."

Hanethe laughs. "With yeya, too, people seem to be born with different amounts. Most people have enough that they can learn to light the fire and keep their water sweet, as long as they live where there's yeya enough for them to learn to use it early. Lots of people have something extra, a yeyan gift, which comes to them easily without needing to learn it. Ferrand bounces things along the air—you must have seen him with the sheaves."

Jankin nods. "Hodge has that too. Are they inherited?"

"It seems that way, although it doesn't seem to work as logic would expect. It's yeya. There's also some evidence that they can be caught—sometimes if children are very close they will learn each other's gift. It's usually brothers and sisters but it doesn't have to be. I had a teacher in the East who had learned the gift of his master's son. They were the same age and he was taken as a very small boy to be a companion. They grew up together and the gift transferred."

"Did the master's son learn the slave's gift?" Jankin asks.

"No. But my teacher's ability to use yeya was very strong, so that might have been why it happened. Nobody knows. Strong yeya is a different thing. I said everyone is born with a little, well some, like...Emelis, are born with a stronger measure." She had intended to use herself as an example, but caught her tongue at the last moment. She is becoming interested despite herself. "Those who have that are drawn more and more East where yeya is easier to use."

"And if they are born where there isn't enough to learn to use it?" Jankin asks.

"They must stay blind to it, I suppose. I've never knowingly met such."

People keep coming and going to the water while they are talking and there is a constant background murmur of their chatter. Now it cuts off, and a darker shadow than the tree's shade seems to fall across them. Hanethe looks up and is unsurprised to see Dolkis. The yeyana between her fallen breasts shines in the sunlight. To Hanethe's yeyan senses, Dolkis gives off a strong sense of contained power, like a banked fire.

Without wasting words, Dolkis puts out her power to pull Hanethe towards her. They are suddenly in an empty place, a tunnel walled with crackling yeya, Hanethe is sitting and Dolkis is standing and a compulsion draws Hanethe to stand and move towards Dolkis. For half an instant it beats against her will before it falls back, defeated. Then it comes back as a physical tug, trying to move her body forward. This is stronger and Hanethe sees Dolkis smile a little. Hanethe raises a finger and the pull is gone. Still they have not spoken. Hanethe waits for another attack and when it does not come draws on the yeya herself to push Dolkis away. Dolkis stands firm and after a moment steps forward. The more Hanethe pushes, the closer she comes. As she puts out a hand to touch her, Hanethe reaches for the sensory world, the grain-field, sun through the leaves of the hedge-trees, the scent of grass and sweat, and the taste on her tongue of water recently swallowed. Dolkis falls

back with a jerk and they are two old women staring at each other again.

Dolkis looks a little disconcerted.

"Did they not tell you I was more than your match?" Hanethe asks.

"They told me you were a heretic and required back in the East," Dolkis says, her voice harsh. "That is enough."

"Enough for you to attack me today instead of waiting for the properly set trial in three days time?" Hanethe asks mildly.

"What attack?" Jankin asks, his eyebrows raising in surprise.

"What attack?" Dolkis echoes, smiling.

Dolkis could attack again at any moment. Hanethe stands, holding her defences around her like a nested set of rings, and walks back up the field to rejoin the grubbers cutting the last of the barley.

11

Jankin enjoys the harvest. He enjoys helping in the field and learning a new skill. Ranal finds a smock for him. It is old and threadbare and too long in the arms, but more practical than his own leather clothes. He spends most of a morning scything with Chayra. Before he grows bored with it, Ranal sends him back to Taveth with an armful of flowers she wants for making yeyana.

She asks for them at breakfast. They are sitting around the big kitchen table. As Taveth serves her family porridge she is constantly aware of Jankin, though he does nothing but eat normally. He takes wintersweet, she notices, and apples and raisins. He has few shadows showing this morning. Sometimes he looks at her and smiles—more often he does not—eating and talking to the others, and she knows she is much too conscious of his eyes.

Kevan is eating abstractedly, porridge dripping from his spoon onto the table and down his harvest smock. Hanethe is eating meekly beside Melly. She is sitting so tensely that Taveth wonders that her bones do not snap under the pressure. A younger shadow of Melly's watches Hanethe cautiously, sometimes seeming to reach out towards her. A shadow of Hanethe's of about the same age reaches out to Melly's shadow, and they seem to see each other. Taveth looks away uneasily.

Taveth puts a fresh porridge pot down beside Ranal next to Chayra's empty place. "There are four days before the day Ferrand has set for Hanethe's trial. I intend to use them as best I can," she announces briskly. Everyone looks at her. "As

soon as you've finished breakfast and set off to the harvest, I want to settle down and make yeyana for the village. We don't know what will come on the wind, but everyone should be as protected as possible. I want to make something for every house."

Chayra comes down the stairs, yawning, and carrying Tydsey. She is wearing her smock and has her hair tied tightly back, with a spray of butterflowers twined through it. That reminds Taveth of what else she needs. "I want someone to bring me some straw, if there is any to spare," she says, spooning porridge into a bowl for Chayra, who hands Tydsey to Ranal. She sits down between Ranal and Jankin, who moves to make room for her.

"Plenty," Ranal says, jouncing Tydsey, who chortles. "Strawflowers too, if you want them, poppies, cornflowers, butterflowers, any use?"

"Yes," Taveth says. "Please. If someone could bring them up. Then this afternoon, I want the children to take the new yeyana around the cottages."

Hodge looks up from his bowl, where he had been solemnly trailing his spoon to make furrows and marking them out again as they disappear. His shadows are drawn in protectively around him. Taveth is expecting a protest, but he just looks at her and lowers his face to the food again. She is worried about him. The excitement of the gates closing last night—the thought of a threat to Applekirk—has shaken him more than any of the rest of them. "Do we have to?" Melly asks, but it is only a token protest.

"We all have to do what we can to help Hanethe," Taveth says. "You know it would usually be you who took yeyana around, so it would be strange if anyone else did it."

"All right," Melly says. Hodge stirs his porridge and at last takes a bite.

"You don't need me to help, do you?" Kevan asks.

Ranal glances at Taveth, then smiles at Kevan. "I hope not. You're too much use in the fields for me to easily spare you."

"Melly and Hodge can do it," Taveth says.

After breakfast they all go out to the fields laughing and teasing each other. "Nearly over. Tomorrow will be the last day of harvesting," Ranal reminds Taveth as he kisses her at the door. "Don't forget to bring the cider to the fields at mid-day. We'll have a thirst for it by then."

"When did I forget?" she asks, smiling.

Once alone, she deals with the breakfast dishes then settles down to make yeyana steadily, weaving together herbs, hair, and ribbon with wishes of protection and good-will. The rhythm comes to her soon and she sings as she works. The song also weaves into the yeyana, a song of protection against the gods. Two hours before noon she finishes, pleased, and stacks one for each family carefully in a basket. Once she has the straw she will make plaited dolls to go with them.

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When Jankin comes in with the straw, Taveth is making pies. First she makes pastry, delighting in the sensual delight of rubbing the fat into the flour. She sets the pastry aside when it is mixed and cuts strips of fat pork and bacon, fries them with onion, garlic, and a little thyme, then adds a splash of fermented yeast from the pot in the larder. She wonders about pepper, her hand hesitating over the pot, but decides against, because it is running very low. She fetches white and purple turnips from the sand pit in the larder, smelling of earth and sweetness. She slices them thin and throws them in with the meat. As the mixture cooks quietly in the pan she piles wood into the bake-oven to heat it. She divides the pastry into four, rolls it out quickly, and lines her two deep pie dishes. As she turns to the pan to fill them with the meat she sees Jankin standing very still in the doorway, his arms full of straw and flowers.

She jumps. "How long have you been there?" she asks.

"You look so confident doing that, almost as if you're dancing," he replies. "I didn't want to startle you as you were moving the pastry in your hands like that, turning it as you moved."

"Oh, it's easy," she says automatically, shaking her hair back out of her face, amazed he had noticed, that he had looked and seen her, where she is so accustomed to being taken for granted. "Just let me finish these and then I'll take the straw from you, if you're all right with it for the moment."

"I'm happy to watch you," he says. "I'll just stand here quietly."

Taveth feels heat rising in her face and wonders if he sees. She divides the meat mixture deftly between the two pie dishes, adds a splash of cream and a splash of water to each, then takes up one of the two cut lids, turning it in her fingers, very conscious now of his gaze as she sets it over the meat and presses down with her thumbs to join pastry to pastry. She puts the lid on the second pie and considers the scraps of pastry that were left. It would be quicker to cook the pies without, but the children would complain. She shapes them rapidly to pigs, trees, and one last oddment into a rough oval she can claim as a turnip if pressed. She wipes them quickly with a cloth dipped in milk and arranges them on the top of the pies. She takes up her knife and makes two cuts in each pie-crust, for the steam, blows on her hands against the heat, then carefully sets the pies side by side in the centre of the hot bake-oven.

"There, now they will be ready for mid-day," she says, wiping the flour from her hands and turning at last to Jankin with her arms out for the straw and flowers.

"Now can I kiss you?" Jankin asks plaintively, dropping the straw onto the bench haphazardly and putting his arms around her. "You know I've adored you since the moment I saw you."

"I—there isn't time," she says, her body already relaxing against his warmth. She is reluctant to touch him, absurdly conscious that her hands are damp and perhaps still a little floury.

"Those pies will be an hour at least," Jankin says, his face pressed into her throat, his lips against her skin. "I have spoken to Ranal and he seems quite happy. You can spare me an hour, beautiful Taveth? Taveth my love?" He kisses her between phrases.

"It's just that I'm not sure my legs will hold me," she says, very aware of the moment, of her body and his.

"Then I'll carry you," he says, and with an arm under her knees and another at her shoulders lifts her into his arms as easily as she might lift Tydsey. She looks up at him open-mouthed, then begins to laugh.

"Put me down! Jankin you idiot, I'm much too heavy, you'll drop me!"

"I'm stronger than I look," he informs her as he begins to stagger towards the stairs, still carrying her.

"I can walk!" she insists.

He sets her down carefully but keeps an arm around her waist as they go up together towards the waiting bed in Perry's room.

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She comes down again just in time to keep the pies from burning—they are already much browner than she usually allows. She sets them carefully on the table, feeling looser in all her joints, as if she had been basking in the sun and drinking wine. She stands and blinks at the pies for a moment. She wants to go back upstairs to Jankin. First times are always a little awkward, but they are also special. She would have liked to wallow. Still, making love in daytime is a self-indulgence, feeding the family is essential. Taveth sighs a little and begins to fill a basket for the harvesters. A whole wheel of yellow cheese, as big as her head. A ripened fruit-cake, almost as large. The last two strings of smoked sweet sausages—there will be no more until the end of summer when Ranal will kill the pigs. Five loaves of

leavened rye bread from yesterday afternoon. The two steaming pies, fresh from the oven.

Jankin comes down as she is filling a second basket with stone jars of cold strong cider. "Let me carry those," he says, his voice a little rough, as if suddenly shy. She looks up at him. He is wearing the old smock Ranal has lent him, thin and patched. The yoke hangs crookedly from his shoulders. She sees the small boy he had been, in unfamiliar clothes, unsure how to make his smock hang. She walks over and straightens it for him, from the shoulders, hardly touching him, but in a way she would not have felt she had the right to do, before they had lain down together. Strange, she thinks, there is nothing sexual in it, she would straighten Hodge's smock like that, or her father or brother's, but sex is the bond that lets her reach out now to tweak Jankin's straight. Then he leans down and kisses her enthusiastically. After a moment he pulls back, smiling, to look into her face. He seems so pleased with himself that she can't help smiling back.

"It's mid-day already. You carry the cider, I'll take the food," she says, a little breathless.

"Will that be enough for everyone?" he asks, looking at her basket doubtfully as they go out through the door.

"It's not meant to be enough to feed the whole village, it's the contribution from the manor, which is a different thing. Everyone will have brought some food of their own, which everyone will share. We bring more, because we have more, and because we expect everyone to work the domain land, though of course it's part of their tallage to do that. But that's no reason not to reward them a little as well."

"You're babbling," Jankin informs her as he stands back to allow her to precede him through the garden gate. "I'm naturally fascinated to hear about the tallage customs here, which sound much more pleasant than where I grew up, but all the same, you're babbling."

"We've haven't been talking, and now that we are I'm a little unsure what to say," Taveth says, laughing. "I'm over

forty, and I'm acting the fool like someone of Kevan's age. Love undoes me."

"Love confounds people at every age," Jankin says gravely. A fifteen-year-old shadow of his winks lasciviously at Taveth. "And we were talking in bed, we were merely talking with bodies. You're babbling because we've got further in that conversation than we have with words."

They are almost to the gate where the previous night Jankin stood ready with the others to defend Applekirk. "I think—" she begins shyly, but he interrupts her.

"What the blotch is that!"

Taveth follows his gaze eastward and sees nothing except the grey stone wall running off in both directions, the gatehouse, the arch of the gate, the spire of the nemet, and distant hills—oaks and maples blowing a little in a wind out of the East that is drawing with it thin high sparkling threads of cloud. She looks back, puzzled.

"Those blue and silver strands in the sky, what are they?" Jankin asks urgently.

She laughs. Jankin looks at her with strained patience and she sees his sixteen-year-old shadow, furious. "They're nothing," she says. "It's a meltemi, a warm summer wind out of the East. Those are just clouds. Don't you have them in Marakanda?"

"No," Jankin says, and resumes walking, his eyes on the sky.

"What's a blotch?" Taveth asks as they pass under the gate.

"It's a drop of ink in the wrong place that obscures text," Jankin says absently, craning his neck to see the clouds. "Do those glowing clouds bring different kinds of weather from normal?"

"No...they're not unusual, really. By the time they're overhead they'll just look like any other thin wisps of cloud."

"Do they have any other names?" Jankin isn't paying any attention to either Taveth or the path, but walking with his head turned entirely up and to the East. Taveth would take his

arm to keep him upright if she didn't need both hands for the heavy basket.

"People here mostly call wind and cloud together meltemi, but when I was a girl in Margam people called the clouds meldrami. Ranal still sometimes says that."

"Ah ha!" Jankin almost bounces off the track. "I knew it. Mildram clouds. Gavre wrote about them. He said they brought different moods and he speculated that they might be the colour they were for the same reason that distance is—that they were blue, blueness, the essence of blue, flowing into the world from the distance."

"The moods bit is true, but they're purple sometimes," Taveth says, fascinated to see him focus the full force of his attention on something so trivial.

"Well, Gavre was well west of here...and I've always liked the idea, without ever having seen any, because it explains why the distance always appears blue. Which it does, but if the facts contradict the theory then it is clearly wrong. I wonder what causes them really? I wonder if I could get close to one, on a mountain perhaps when they were down as fog? Most people in the Schools in Marakanda disbelieve in their existence, despite there being several mentions in various Marisian poets and even one Belvede agricultural treatise. Aldusa claimed they were a poetic conceit. Pah, look at them!" He waves his arm at the clouds and almost overturns the basket.

"Now who's babbling?" Taveth asks, pleased to be able to tease him by turning the tables on him this way.

Jankin stops dead with his mouth open. "I—" he begins, and splutters to a stop. "I wasn't *babbling*, woman!" he says. "I wasn't talking about the meldrami to avoid talking about something personal. I was just—"

"You were babbling," Taveth says firmly. "Babbling about the clouds, of all ridiculous things." Jankin sets down his basket carefully and takes hers out of her hands. "There are people in the barley field waiting for that," she protests.

"They can wait," he says, and puts his arms around her waist, presses her tightly to him and kisses her firmly.

She picks up her basket as soon as he lets her go. "What was that for?" she asks, as he steps up beside her, cider-basket decorously over his arm.

"Raensome," he says smugly.

They come around the hedge at the top of the harvest field. "I'm too old for this," Taveth says.

"No you're not," Jankin says. "You've counted wrong. You're actually twenty-four. If you're really nearly fifty where are you hiding the silver in your hair?"

"Twenty-four!" Taveth shakes her head. "My daughter Perry is nearly twenty-two. And there are some silver hairs in there."

"I must have a closer look," Jankin says provocatively.

"Not now! The children are coming!" Hodge and Melly are running towards them, followed by a crowd of children of the village. At the lower end of the field, the adults are setting down their tools and stretching. Hanethe is on the very end of the row, next to Ferrand. Kevan and Ranal are at the other end. Chayra is towards the centre. "Besides, it's nothing but blood. My father's hair was almost all black until he died, and he was very old then. As for counting wrong, you must know how difficult it is, moving Eastwards. How long will pass for you back home in Marakanda, and how do you count?"

"I'm starving!" Melly shouts. "Everyone is starving!"

"Mother said she'd start gnawing the scythe if you didn't come soon," Hodge says.

"There's plenty of food," Taveth says.

"Pies!" Melly calls, looking into the basket. "Is there cake?"

"Of course there's cake. Let's take it down where everyone is and get it spread out," Taveth says, smiling at Melly, but still very aware, too aware, of Jankin walking smoothly at her side.

"Gods be thanked, cake!" Hodge says.

Then Taveth sees that there is a stranger coming along the road beside the field, a tall dark-skinned young woman with a pack, dangling a straw hat covered in strawflowers. She squints for a moment before she is sure. It has been a long time. "Perry!" she calls, delighted almost to tears. Perry pushes through the hedge and then she is embracing Taveth, embracing Hodge and Melly, embracing Chayra, who is openly weeping, embracing Ferrand. Ranal and Kevan come running towards them. Jankin is looking bemused.

"Jankin, this is my elder daughter, Peronel," Taveth says, and in the general confusion of return, Perry embraces Jankin too.

12

"After that," Kevan says, casting his line far out to avoid what might be a log or what might be a lovadile floating downriver disguised as a log, "After the harvest, after Perry came home and Agdisdis showed her hand, everything more or less happened one thing after another."

Taveth smiles. In her memory, things do not happen that way. But Kevan and Hodge agree on the ordering of events after that, with a minimum of disagreement, so she goes along with them. "More or less," she agrees.

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Jankin tells Dolkis, truthfully, that he is not a pious man. Chayra is the only one of them who could be called pious. She goes to the nemet more often than she needs to. She often takes circlets of flowers to girdle the statue of Calva, goddess of love, and gives pots to Tegnay, lady of craft. Perry returns from Belvede with a particular devotion to Tegnay, and this becomes a bond between them. Later in life, Kevan becomes fond of cold Damona and has a shrine to her built at the back of the old nemet, where the burning fire is lit. Hodge always has a fondness for Velovis, because he was born on Velovis's day, the first day of spring. The rest of them get married under the sign of Agdisdis, name their children under the sign of Mitra, attend the nemet on feast days, and respect the gods as distant powerful forces, not entirely to be trusted. Hanethe—who has been in the East and knows the gods intimately, and has met

them at dances—is perhaps the least pious of them all. When she goes into the nemet on holy days she feels the eyes of the village on her. They know where she has been, and if not what she has done, at least that she has come back. She does not pray. She disdains the hypocrisy.

Nevertheless, early in the morning of the day of the harvest festival, Hanethe makes her way down to the glebehouse. At the dinner Taveth gives to honour Perry's return Gislain suggests that Hanethe should join them at the glebehouse for breakfast. She says it would be good for her to know Timot, the stable priest, and for him to know her. Everyone agrees that it would be good. When explaining the situation to Perry, Ferrand frowns. He is afraid there will be trouble whatever judgement he makes. He is not thinking of the gods as much as of the villagers, who he likes and knows like him, and who he feels are his responsibility. Hanethe asks Gislain if Dolkis will be there for breakfast. She wants to avoid encountering her as much as possible. Gislain laughs and said that Dolkis is rarely there and never in the morning. Hanethe wonders where she goes—out agitating among the villagers? (At breakfast? Hanethe can believe it of Dolkis, but not of the villagers.) Or communing with Agdisdis as best she can at this distance? Dawn and dusk are best for that, Hanethe knows, so perhaps she is. She shies away from the thought.

The glebehouse stands next to the nemet, a low stone building with the usual soft red roof. The garden is full of tended flowers, marigolds, pinks, creeping jenny, roses, and sweetneaps. It is a delight to the eye after the endless poppies and butterflowers of the barley field. The path is flagged and the door, to Hanethe's surprise, is open. As she walks up the path Gislain comes out, carrying a stool which she sets down among the flowers. Her fine black hair is braided elaborately, with little golden beads at the end of the braids. This is as close to being dressed up as a priest can come. Gislain is looking forward to the festival.

"Good morning, Hanethe," she calls, the beads shaking as her head turns. "Sit down. I won't be a moment."

She vanishes inside again before Hanethe can return her greeting. When she re-emerges she is carrying a small wooden table which she sets down by the stool. She is followed by a stout elderly man, clearly the other priest, carrying a second stool. He sets it down by the table and immediately lowers himself onto it. His hair is entirely grey, even his pubic thatch and the straggle of hairs in the centre of his chest where his yeyana rests.

"Sit, sit," he urges Hanethe, gesturing to the other stool.

She obeys uncertainly.

"It's such a beautiful morning," Gislain says. "Hanethe, this is Timot, priest of Liakan, stable of Applekirk. Timot, this is Hanethe, once lord of Applekirk."

"I've heard such a lot about you," Timot says, smiling. His face is creased with age but when he smiles it is clear that he is a kindly man by temperament. Hanethe feels a little reassured.

"Not all terrible, I hope?" she asks. She smoothes the silk of her cape over her shoulders.

Timot chuckles. Gislain vanishes inside again. "Well, it has been from a variety of sources," Timot says. "So I have to admit that the reports have not been uniformly favourable."

Gislain comes back with a teapot and two cups. "Aren't you staying?" Hanethe asks.

"I promised I'd go and help Marjorane dress," she says. Marjorane, youngest daughter of Benoit, the elderly village reeve, is this year's queen of the harvest festival.

"You'll find Chayra and Peronel there, helping," Hanethe says. "They were about to leave when I came out."

"But not Taveth?" Timot asks. "I never know how women decide these things."

"Ah, it's a mystery," says Gislain, looking mysterious.

"Taveth has every bowl in the kitchen out to make the festival plait cake," Hanethe says.

Timot laughs and Gislain goes back inside. "I'm looking forward to that cake," Timot says. "But we won't make you wait so long."

"It's a long time since I tasted a harvest cake," Hanethe admits. It is a strange cake, being a risen bread dough filled with layers of wintersweet, raisins, and lard, pressed down again before being plaited. It is too much trouble to make often, but everyone loves it. When Hanethe is a child her grandmother makes it. The year after the Plague there is only pastry with a few raisin scraps, but they cheer as they eat it. Someone always makes a harvest cake. Every year from the time she comes from Margam, Taveth makes a huge plait which the harvest queen cuts at the festival. This is the last year she makes one, because later they remind her of Jankin and all that happened. Old Orbel takes on the duty, coming up to the manor every year to bake it in the big oven. Hodge marries at harvest and has two cakes made, one for the harvest festival and the other as a wedding cake. Taveth makes his wedding cake, and plaits it in the shape of a crown.

Gislain comes back with a loaf of plain bread on a wooden trencher and a pot of preserve. She sets down the trencher and it proves to have two others beneath it, which she deals to Timot and to Hanethe. "Do I need to bring a knife?" she asks.

Hanethe shakes her head and reaches for her belt knife.

"Oh, good, then you can cut the bread while I pour," Timot says calmly.

"See you later at the dancing," Gislain says, waving a hand as she goes down the path.

"Make sure you save one dance for me," Timot calls back. "And you too, Hanethe. It's not often I have two young ladies to beg for dances early on a festival morning."

Hanethe looks up from slicing the bread. "I'm not young," she says. She never has any time for flirtation, even when she is young.

"No, no." Timot hands her the cup of tisane. The cup is blue and has no handle—it is one of the ones Chayra makes and sells widely the year before Tydsey is born. "I gather that you're much older than I am, which is very interesting, because you seem to be only a little more than fifty, and I am over sixty."

"I've been in the East," Hanethe says, touching her badger-coloured hair self-consciously. The scent of the roses comes to her on a breath of wind, like a scent in a dream. She pushes away memory.

"I know how that can alter time," he says sympathetically, but his blue eyes—the same blue as the cup—are sharp. He takes a piece of bread and spreads it with a generous helping of the preserves. "I hear you've been with the gods, which must give you a very different perspective on the relationship between gods and Nemet."

"I suppose it does." Hanethe takes a piece of bread and sets it on her trencher. "I don't know what your perspective is, of course."

"Do take some of these preserves, they're excellent. In fact they were made by Taveth, so you must know how excellent they are. These are blackberry. I think we also have some redberry inside, if you prefer? No? Well, my view is that the gods are almost irrelevant to the Nemet. The Nemet does a number of useful things, but it is a human organization, organized mostly, but not entirely, for the benefit of humanity."

Hanethe drops a spoonful of preserves onto her trencher.

"I did say not entirely," Timot says mildly. "Scrape it up with your knife, you don't want to waste it. The Nemet provides a structure to the year, it provides a place for scholarship, and it provides charity in places where charity is needed. It also allows people a way to direct their worship of the gods, which for some people is an outlet for their spirituality, and for others a genuine devotion to one god or another. The Nemet is strongest in the Marches you know, where it is far away from direct

control of the gods. Besides there are two other purposes... Do eat your bread."

He waits, looking at Hanethe, until she takes a bite and chews without tasting it.

"The Nemet is also an organization that acts to preserve itself, its privileges, and its powers. And it also works in the capacity where you must have had most contact with it, sending appropriate people East to the gods, to what we sometimes call heaven or paradise, to eternal bliss in the arms of the god of their devotion. That, I gather, is what you rejected."

Hanethe is reeling. "Has anyone told you you're a heretic?" she asks.

Timot laughs, his eyes almost disappearing in the creases of his face. "Why no, I'm much too old and fat to be a heretic." He grows serious. "Yes, I know that what I'm saying is not what they teach priests to say about the Nemet. I'm not standing up and saying it in the pulpit either. If I were I would say that the purpose of the Nemet is to guide a flow of worship to the gods and to help people behave as the gods would wish. These are my private thoughts, expressed in private to someone I trust will understand them."

"And what makes you trust that?" Hanethe asks, taking another bite of the much too sweet preserve and delicious yeasty bread.

"Largely what Dolkis has been saying about you." Timot grins. "Whether or not you agree with me, I think you'll understand me. I haven't decided what, if anything, I can do about you. But I know you have spent time in the farthest East and rejected the mercy and wonders of Agdisdis to flee here."

"That's what Dolkis told you?"

"Isn't it true?" The priest's eyes are fixed on Hanethe.

Mercy and wonders, Hanethe thinks. "It's true enough as far as it goes," she says. "I was in the East, and I did flee Agdisdis's vengeance."

"The question of why would be very interesting, but I'm not asking it," Timot says, taking another slice of bread and spreading more preserve on it. "Frankly, the less I know about it the better. Whatever you did, you did in the East, not here. That is your problem, but it isn't mine. Mine is Dolkis."

"Dolkis?"

"Yes. I've given you my views on the gods being irrelevant to the Nemet. If they stay in the East and inspire a distant devotion, well and good, but when they come meddling, trying to get things changed, well sometimes that's a good thing, but far more often it turns out to be a terrible thing, disruptive, even devastating. This matter doesn't show any signs of being a good thing. Dolkis..." He takes a large sip of his tisane as if for strength. "Priests enter the Nemet for a variety of reasons, you know. I see them all, living here as stable and seeing the ambules come and go. There are those like Gislain, who are burning with devotion for their god, and want to help people in their god's name. They are the best, but there are few of them. She comes from a good family but she has no connections in the Nemet. It will be years if ever before she can become stable anywhere and when she is, it will be far from the hierarchies of power. Still, I have come to see that this is good, that there is more to be done outside them, in small ways. Gislain will do little bits of good for Diktin, for animals, and for people, all over the Marches, and that, I believe, shines brighter than if she might become a hierophant and preach in the great echoing nemets of Maris."

He finishes his second slice of bread and takes a third. "I am the younger son of the brother of the last Lord Engleram," he says, quirking a brow at Hanethe. "This makes the present Lord Engleram my cousin. What lifelode for such as me? I was a fat boy and became a fat man, I was used to eating well. Law, perhaps, but it had little appeal to me. I was no scholar. The Nemet offered a safe lifelode. I had no deep attachment to wearing clothes, and that seemed the only real disadvantage. I attached myself to Liakan, who did not object, and my uncle

persuaded Irmin, the previous Lord Applekirk, to give this position to me when it fell vacant, in return for some favour Irmin wanted. Did you ever know Irmin?"

"No." She sips her tisane, which has cooled enough for her now. It is peppermint and tansy, pleasantly bracing.

"It's strange. He must have been your grandson, and I knew him when he was older than you seem to be. Ferrand didn't get on with him, in the way of sons and fathers. I always found both of them good lords to the village. I have been here forty years. I'm fat and lazy like all the bad priests in all the stories. I don't think I've been a bad priest to Applekirk, but this is considering my view of the Nemet. I've not done much for Liakan, as he lives and acts away off in the East, as distinct from any need the villagers might have for Liakan in their daily lives."

"He wouldn't want you to," Hanethe says, thinking of Liakan as she has known him. She has finished her slice of bread and takes a second, without the preserves this time.

"Wouldn't he, indeed?" Timot stares across to the old grey spire of the nemet for a moment. "Well, and so that brings me to our third kind who are drawn to the priesthood. They may or may not love the gods, they may or may not want a comfortable lifelode, but what is certain is that they love power and they see the Nemet as their sure and certain route to power. Dolkis is one of those. In her case she does love Agdisdis, or her idea of Agdisdis. She may end by going East and serving Agdisdis directly there. But she will only do that if she can't rise to a considerable power within the organization of the Nemet in the Marches. Unless I am very wrong, she is already highly placed. I know she is a hierophant."

"You don't like her," Hanethe says. A bird is singing somewhere in the trees, the same call repeated over and over.

"She's a dangerous fanatic of a kind I don't want near my congregation. She'll be sniffing out heresy in no time—and I don't mean what you were kind enough to call my heresies about Nemet organization. I mean villagers who in their harm-

less rural ignorance pray to the wrong gods at the wrong time or who believe the old story that Diktin and Liakan are married. She is here for you, but while she is here she will do terrible damage. She has already made the villagers a mob." A large black-and-white cat walks out of the front door and stalks through the flowers towards them. "Now, I don't want you to tell me what you've done to anger Agdisdis. I don't want you to tell me what the gods are really like in the East and what they really want. I want you to get rid of Dolkis as fast as you can."

"How?" Hanethe asks.

He smiles. The cat jumps up onto his lap and he pets it absently. "It may be that the fastest way to be rid of her is to surrender to her and go East to whatever they want you for. Or it may be to defeat her here in court. I don't care, but I don't want her here disturbing everything and everybody. We are too far west for Agdisdis to turn up with a pair of swans and a canopy of gold. She might send moods on the wind, but we are largely used to that. It is Dolkis and her interfering that worries me."

"Will you testify that I am a harmless old woman and as devout as anyone else?" Hanethe asks bluntly.

"Will Gislain?" Timot asks, looking down at the cat, who is staring at Hanethe unblinkingly.

"I think so. She said she would pray for guidance, and she is unlikely to hear any evil of me from Diktin."

"Nor I from Liakan?" Timot finishes his tisane and pours himself more.

"No indeed," Hanethe says. The cat yawns, and curls up on Timot's lap.

"What will you say?"

"That though I opposed Agdisdis I did nothing wrong in the East, and unless Dolkis brings detailed charges, which I doubt she will be prepared to do, I refuse to return there to the persecution of Agdisdis." Hanethe feels her mouth twisting into a smile.

"That will not get rid of Dolkis," Timot says, looking stern. "Do not mistake my laziness for indifference. I want her gone."

"Saying that will send her off for fresh instructions, and most likely they will send someone else if they hear she has failed."

"You don't think she has details?" Timot strokes the cat absently. It begins to purr.

"Agdisdis wouldn't tell someone like her the details. Besides, she has nothing to gain by having the details aired in public, and perhaps things to lose. She's unlikely to have told anyone she sends out the details, she's just going to be sending out the call to bring me in. I don't know why she wants me back. I wish I did."

"Perhaps you should leave," Timot suggests mildly.

"I would, although this is my home and I have nowhere to go. I don't want to bring trouble down on good people any more than you want to see it come. But I have taken on a responsibility here, for Emelis—for Melly," she amends, knowing the priest would only know her earlier name, "And I am also teaching the other children, Hadley and Gisil and Nan. I cannot leave without them or risk taking them into flight to nowhere. Melly should not go to the West in any case."

Timot is silent for a moment, finishing his bread, dropping a large crumb onto the black-and-white cat, who twitches it off. The sound of birdsong is loud in the garden. "You say the other gods will not speak against you," he says. "Could you ask them for help?"

"Against Agdisdis's direct anger? None of them owes me that much, or anything at all," Hanethe says. She has finished her breakfast.

"Then unless Liakan urges me differently, I will join with-Gislain in saying that you seem as devout as anyone and that the gods do not direct me to speak against you," Timot says.

Hanethe rises and bows, arms folded formally. He might be a lazy greedy village priest, but he is the first person she has met since she came back to Applekirk who has caused her to feel respect.

"You are nothing like as arrogant as people told me you are," Timot says, conversationally, as she sits down again.

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The family and the villagers love the harvest festival. Ranal, like the villagers, truly feels the relief of the end of harvesting, the pause for fun before the threshing starts. All the children love it. They run about everywhere, never still, delighting in the excitement. They take their parts in the entertainment very seriously. When Ferrand is a boy he cannot sleep the night before, trying to remember every line in the play. Hodge in his turn is more confident. He worries, but does not let it disturb his calm. Kevan stops sulking for the festival. His lover Hilden is there and the two of them are inseparable and ubiquitous, guessing the number of beans in the pod, throwing rings onto sticks, and competing for cookies. When Hanethe is a child she loves it too, but by the time she is Kevan's age the village is painfully thinned and the festival seems a shadow. When she comes back she finds it has hardly changed at all. She walks about trying to be gracious to the villagers and fails. Cheered by her meeting with Timot she is less unhappy than usual. She takes cookies as she used to long ago and gives thanks for them with the same ritual words. When the dancing starts she dances with Timot and with Ferrand, who never shirks his duty, and with Ranal, who is always kind.

Chayra loves the harvest festival because there is dancing. Taveth usually enjoys it, much as the villagers do, a familiar break in the routine and one of the spokes of the turning year. Perry is surprised by it. "It's smaller," she says. She will have to grow into it again. Ferrand, once he is grown, endures it as he endures the harvesting—he thinks it all necessary but tedious.

If he had not been born heir to Applekirk and could have chosen his own lifelode it would have been very different, he thinks sometimes. The ritual and the excitement and above all the repetition make him feel too tightly bounded by the world. The festival seems to him too limited by the traditional—always and inevitably the same faces, the same play, the same songs, and the same dances spiralling round and round forever. It is after a harvest festival that he makes up his mind to leave, to see more of the world than this one horizon. This is how, unlike all the other lords, he travels before he settles down to his duty.

Jankin too finds it disappointing. He grew up in a village in the Westmarch and if he'd needed to catalogue the festival he'd have noted down 'the usual rustic stuff'. He thinks Marjorane, the girl who is Queen of the revels, is pretty enough, but he finds it hard to get excited about yokels singing and reciting. Even the food disappoints him. A roast boar, bread, little cakes, and cookies—these last baked by everyone who had a recipe—freely shared, too freely, in Jankin's opinion. Eating a cookie or a cake is well enough, but having one pressed on him every few steps, with the makers waiting eagerly to see how he enjoys them, becomes torture after quite a short while.

The best thing about the festival for Jankin is that it lets him avoid Dolkis. He has done what she wanted in getting involved with Taveth. He doesn't see it doing what she wanted it to, so much the better. He can butter both sides of his bread there, he thinks and smiles to himself. Jankin thinks Dolkis cannot be angry with him, since he has done what she told him to. If he does not spend time with her he cannot be given new tasks or chastised.

Just as he is thinking this she looms up unexpectedly among the crowds of cheerful villagers, like a crow among pigeons, startling him. "I need to speak to you," she says.

"If I am seen speaking to you for long it will make my hosts suspicious," Jankin replies in an undertone. They are still surrounded by people.

Even Dolkis can see the logic of this, though he fears for a moment that she will insist and begins considering what other excuses he could make.

"Briefly, you've been a fool, but Agdisdis will lend you her aid today, or you will feel her wrath," Dolkis says. "I will see you tomorrow and speak to you if I need to. I will be in the nemet."

Jankin bows and turns away from her with only a faint qualm. He does not fear Agdisdis's wrath half as much as he fears Dolkis herself and the enmity of the Nemet. Who is Agdisdis anyway, nothing but protector of marriage, and what is marriage? In Applekirk, Agdisdis doesn't seem very effective in hurting an outright enemy like Hanethe. How much less would she be able to reach him in Marakanda! Perhaps she might act in her sphere and prevent him from marrying, but as marriage is a social contract he has neither the desire nor the financial security to enter, that might be a blessing. He has had time to think and no longer even half believes that the gods had caused the actions which had led him here. He is ashamed of having been taken in, like a child, by Dolkis. The world is what it is. Dolkis's threats against his oath are what he has to fear, and he decides to allay them by seeming to do what she wants. He thinks his relationship with Taveth ought to satisfy her while not in reality causing the slightest crack in any marriage.

A man is playing a cheerfully lilting tune on a drum and flute. Jankin takes a cookie from a pretty girl with festival flowers in her hair and begins to walk in time to the music. Dolkis, who is still watching him, smiles a smile he would not have liked at all had he seen it.

When Jankin catches sight of Taveth through the crowd and makes his way to her, dodging baked goods all the way, she is laughing and offering cookies of her own.

"I don't suppose you have an hour free to come into the fields and be wreathed with harvest flowers?" he murmurs, kissing her.

She blushes, though she already wears one blue cornflower tucked behind her ear. "We mustn't miss the play," she says.

Jankin smiles and bows, but thinks secretly that he might miss the play without any loss. Living in Marakanda he can always see professional players acting new plays in the playhouse. Here the players have been parading earlier with huge heads of animals and gods on their shoulders. "What play is it to be?" he asks.

"*How the Ass Discovered Grain*, since it is harvest," Taveth says, surprised that he does not know. "Why, don't they act that at harvest in the Westmarch?"

"They do," Jankin says. "That's how I've seen it and why I would rather have an hour with you."

"But Hodge is the Rooster and Ferrand the Ass," Taveth says. "And Melly is the Hen, and it's her first time."

"Then let me escort you," Jankin says gallantly, resigning himself to boredom.

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The play takes place on the raised trestle where he saw the singers earlier. There are no curtains and no scenery, and almost no props except the grotesque heads. He lets his mind wander through the first part of the play, thinking about Taveth's generous body and what they did together the previous night. He puts his arm around her and squeezes her a little. That makes up for quite a lot of tedium. Dolkis crosses his thoughts like a cold cloud passing overhead, but he dismisses her.

It takes a gasp from the whole audience to draw Jankin's attention to the stage. It is the scene where the Rooster steals the grain from the Ass to make bread instead of beer. In one of Ferrand's innovations, grain is suspended in the air, barely touching Hodge's hands before bouncing back to Ferrand,

around and around in a golden stream, like some impossible kind of juggling.

Melly comes forward, clucking, and with her bottom stuck out in a most henlike way adds an egg to the torrent of grain. The egg bounces along as if it were another grain and each animal actor in turn comes and adds something—a string of sausages from the pig, a jug of milk from the cow, and wool from the sheep. Each gift bounces into the stream of grain and flies merrily around. More things are added—a whistle, a twig, even a book—Ferrand and Hodge keep them going until at some signal Jankin does not see, the flow splits. All the grain arcs high over Ferrand's head and lands in a basket held by Melly, who is crouching behind. The other gifts circle Ferrand for a moment, until he clutches the egg and the jug of milk in his hands and the others fall to the ground. Everyone cheers and Jankin finds himself cheering with them.

"They find a different way to do that every year," Taveth says fondly.

The play proceeds in its unremarkable course and is succeeded by a recitation by an old man bent almost in two, of an interminable poem about grafting pears. Jankin is extremely relieved to see Hodge and Melly waving excitedly at the edge of the crowd. Taveth rises and makes her way towards them and he follows her, smiling his excuses as he passes in front of those whose attention seems riveted on the old man.

"You were wonderful," Taveth says to the children, bending to embrace both of them at once. "Melly, your walk was just right—that bustle, just like a hen. Anyone would think you'd been doing it for years."

"I was so worried about catching the grain," she says. They walk a little way from the audience. "We practiced and practiced, but I needed to be in exactly the right place and we couldn't practice on the stage."

"You were marvellous," Jankin says to Hodge. "The way you juggled all those things was just incredible."

"Oh, that bit's fun," Hodge says. "The hard part is remembering all my lines. Last year I got some wrong and someone corrected me from the audience." He winces in remembered chagrin. "But this year I did it."

"I've never seen anything like that juggling," Jankin says.

"That's because you're from the West where they don't have yeya," Melly says, with a disconcerting stare that reminds him of Hanethe. "You think the rest of it is boring, but you're more impressed with the yeya than you ought to be."

"Maybe I am," he says. "But I didn't think your play was boring, not like that old man and his poem, although everyone else seems to be fascinated by it."

"That's a very instructive poem," Taveth says. "I know Ranal knows it, because it deals with apples too, and apple trees are hard to grow. Most of the people listening so intently want to learn."

"I thought you were interested in learning everything?" Hodge asks.

"Not grafting pears!" Jankin protests.

Taveth laughs. "If you'd found that old poem in a book you'd have liked it better."

"The terrible thing about that is that it's true," Jankin admits. They all laugh. "But then I could have taken it at my own pace, and I don't think I'd have found much to interest me even so. Pears!"

"Don't you like pears?" Chayra asks from behind him. He turns to greet her. She is wearing something that astonishingly leaves her breasts only half covered. He sees them both peeping from beneath some gold shoulder-cloak nonsense. Nobody else seems surprised at her costume, although Jankin is quite sure nobody else is wearing anything like it. He wouldn't have missed it—every movement, almost every breath Chayra takes, flutters the cloak thing, concealing and revealing her breasts, which are very pale, unsurprisingly for her complexion, with nipples the pink of wild roses, much smaller than Taveth's, and

almost conical. Really, he thinks, striving to be dispassionate, they are very close to what the poet Dandolo described as the ideal breast, pointed, with a distinct nipple, and of a size to fill a man's palm. Jankin has seen quite a few breasts, but except in the case of priests, where nakedness is generally no more erotic than it would be in an animal, he has usually seen them only in an intimate context.

Jankin becomes distantly aware that he is answering something about pears and that Taveth is looking at him. He turns to look back at her—she is beautiful and comfortable and familiar and keeps her body entirely hidden beneath her clothes, which she generally removes by shrugging them off all in one over her head. His wish that they might be alone for an hour has become acute.

"I need to go back," she is saying.

"Can I come with you?" Jankin asks urgently.

Taveth laughs. "No, because then I won't pay any attention to the harvest cake. It must be almost ready to take out of the oven. I need to bring it here for Marjorane to cut. I won't be long."

Chayra giggles. "We'll look after you here Jankin, won't we children?"

"It's nearly time for the dancing," Melly says.

"And I really must have the cake here before the crowning," Taveth says. She kisses Jankin and goes off through the crowd. His knees feel weak and his breeches too tight. He is glad he is wearing the old harvest smock over them, not his own leather tunic.

"That's a beautiful dress," he says to Chayra, although he has hardly looked at the part of it that might be called a dress. He is aware that other people are looking at it—at her—admiringly.

"Eastern fashion," Melly says. "Granny Hanethe brought it back."

"Ranal and I made the dress in that style, but the cape is lent by Hanethe. It's real silk, feel." Chayra is full of herself at the end

of harvest and wild to try Hanethe's Eastern fashion. Encouraging her and trying to be friendly, Hanethe lends her the silk cape, showing her how to gather her dresses. Ranal and Chayra sit up late in the sewing room and make it after Taveth and Jankin are in bed. Taveth knows what they are doing, because she gave them the material. Early in the morning of the festival day, before Jankin is awake, Chayra puts the dress on and shows Taveth, who admires Chayra in it but says she would never want one, because she would look too ridiculous. She laughs as she says it. Chayra looks stunning in it.

Jankin feels the corner she extends to him, entirely exposing one small, pale, and somehow vulnerable breast in the process. "It suits you much better than it does Hanethe," he says sincerely.

Chayra opens her mouth to answer but a blast from a horn drowns out her words. The musicians are striking up a dance tune. The children run off at once to clutch Perry's hands as she forms part of a circle. Jankin feels intoxicated, although he has only drunk one cup of cider. Dolkis is looking at him again, through the crowd, but he does not see her. "Will you dance?" he asks Chayra, offering an arm.

"Eastern fashions and Western dancing," she says smiling. She takes his arm and he remembers all too clearly the time he kissed her in the dining room. She is not as tall as he is. When he is holding her in the dance, he can only see the tops of her breasts, sometimes, but not always covered by the cape. It is more tantalizing than if they were always visible. He keeps looking down at them. She dances very close to him and he can smell the butterflowers plaited into her hair. When the dance ends lots of people seem to be kissing—what harm is there in it, after all, when she is looking up at him so delightedly and she has such charming breasts? She kisses him back, teasing with her tongue, so that when he looks up he is quite dazed. He sees Taveth standing at the side of the dais with a large plait of cake, her face as closed and remote as if she had put up shutters inside her eyes.

Taveth has never had her heart broken by a lover before Jankin breaks it kissing Chayra in such an intimate way in front of all the village, but she recognises the feeling from when Hanethe steals Melly. It feels much worse though, because it wounds her in her pride. Being loved by Jankin makes her feel desirable, young, full of energy. When she sees him kissing Chayra she withers into an unwanted husk, a cast off coccoon. Yet when she is an old woman fishing by the river, she remembers Jankin fondly, though she can never remember Melly without pain.

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Chayra comes up to her after Marjorane has been crowned and is slicing the cake. She tries to say something. "Jankin—"

"No," Taveth says, forcing a smile. "Let it go."

"It was nothing, a spur of the moment kiss—that is all, we were dancing," Chayra says, and all her shadows are looking smug and well-kissed.

"Was it the only time he has kissed you?" Taveth asks.

Chayra blushes and refuses to answer, which makes nonsense of that excuse. Blushes are very noticeable on Chayra's pale skin.

When he comes up to her, Taveth brushes Jankin off even more firmly. "It's quite natural that you should prefer Chayra," she says and turns away.

The next day is a fast, which means she need not cook. She goes to services in the nemet with the family, then takes a long walk down the river with Ferrand and Tydsey. She asks Ferrand if Chayra had spoken to him about Jankin and he confirms that she has not—which means that she is breaking all the rules. She cannot put Jankin out of her mind. It is hard when she is away from him and harder when he is in her presence looking a little hangdog.

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Taveth looks at Chayra across the dinner table and cannot understand her. She has a younger self weeping and another sticking her tongue out. Taveth looks away. Doing ordinary friendly family things with Chayra feels awkward to her at the moment. Chayra is family, whatever else. That is part of why it hurts. They should both have spoken to her if that's what they wanted—if Jankin wanted Chayra as well, or instead. She wouldn't have liked it, but at least they could have managed it with some smidgen of civility. If it had been some village girl she could have understood, but Chayra should have known better. Besides, she doesn't believe for a moment that Chayra really wants Jankin, not the way Taveth wants him. She has seen that Taveth has something she wants and has set out to take it. Taveth sighs.

She has always tried to be tolerant of Chayra's desire to have lovers, to be loved, to find romance. She is so much younger than the rest of them, and her marriage was for policy on everyone's part. Yet she isn't any longer as young as all that and she certainly isn't a child, to have excuses made for bad behaviour. Even though Chayra is so much younger and more beautiful there is never a time before this when Taveth is jealous of her. Ferrand is a lord and needed to marry and always tries hard to make both of them feel wanted. Taveth in her turn tries to give Ferrand and Chayra the space they need. When Ranal—who has never looked at anyone but Taveth since they were both eighteen years old—starts to follow Chayra with his eyes, Taveth is startled at first but then frubbled, as she says to him. Taveth never doubts that she comes first, and never has trouble making room for Chayra to come second. Because they have not spoken to her it seems as if they both treat her like she comes from nowhere and does not matter. It's enough she has had to put up with that from Hanethe, so she is sensitive about it.

She glances at Chayra again surreptitiously. She is stroking the cat Gumble and talking to Kevan, paying no attention to Taveth. She wonders what Chayra means by this all? Before,

she never said anything to Taveth about Jankin beyond ordinary talk about how gorgeous he is, which anyone might have said. Jankin does like breasts, of course, Taveth knows this perfectly well. But even so he should have a little self-control. If he had waited and spoken to her, she tells herself, she wouldn't have minded. Then she realizes that she would, but she'd have hidden it, so at least she wouldn't have been humiliated in front of half the village. That stings. She has to deal with everyone's sympathy and curiosity, which she finds very hard. If they hadn't ignored her, Taveth thinks, it would have been like the other time, with Ranal, who is her husband after all. She'd have been startled, then she'd have dealt with it and come around at last to being frubbled for them. As it is she keeps feeling she can't quite catch her breath, emotionally, and other people expect her to be able to tell them what's going on. Ferrand and Ranal and even the children are gentle with her. Perry is fiercely protective. She isn't used to it at all, and it keeps catching at her when she least expects it. She is almost glad of Hanethe's indifference to her, because at least it is unchanged.

14

The children are kept out of the justice room, as always when Ferrand is holding court. Perry, Kevan, and Hilden take off for the day, hiking in the hills. "I would have thought you'd have had enough hiking coming home," Ferrand says, but Perry shakes her head and laughs. "I want to spend some time with my little brother now he's not so little," she says. Taveth is so caught up in her misery about Jankin that her chief memory later is how heavy Tydsey weighs, asleep on her shoulder. Chayra speaks carefully, and Ranal openly, Ferrand sits in judgement and feels the responsibility heavy on his shoulders. "Bad enough I sit in judgement on my granny," he says truthfully. Hanethe hardly remembers it, except for the moment when Dolkis asks an unexpected question which she answers with the word "Pity."

After two nights in which Jankin is left relentlessly alone and in the day and a half when if he speaks to either woman the other one bristles. Taveth and Chayra are barely speaking either to him or to each other. Ranal looks at him, disgusted. Perry, who is very fond of her mother, is barely polite to him. Ferrand and Hanethe address him in the most formal terms. He catches Kevan giving him glances that are half horrified and half admiring. Only the children remain ordinarily friendly, though he is sure that Hodge at least knows what happened. He looks, half-heartedly, for more Marisian remains, but finds nothing. He hopes that Dolkis at least is pleased at the disruption of Ferrand's home life he has caused. She has no need to know how inadvertant it is. He wonders if she approves of him,

but hasn't been able to speak to her—the only time he has seen her is in the nemet, where she lies prostrated in front of the altar, unmoving throughout the service of thanksgiving. Otherwise, she seems to be avoiding him as much as he avoided her at the festival, and with more success.

When Ferrand comes up and asks for a word, Jankin has no idea what to expect. He follows Ferrand into his part of the house, into a study Jankin immediately covets. The walls are hung with painted cloths showing huge illuminated capitals, a tripled S, a looped O, an old-fashioned double-branched F. There is one window with ivy curling around the edges, letting in light that falls directly on a wooden desk scattered with books and parchments. A silver-patterned lizard skitters away as Jankin's shadow crosses the light. At the side of the desk is a bulging book chest, carelessly propped open and showing signs of recent use. There are three chairs, all draped in red cloth. A brindled cat is curled up asleep on one of them. If he is to be reprimanded at least it is in very comfortable surroundings, Jankin thinks. Ferrand flings himself down on one of the chairs and indicates the one unoccupied by the cat to Jankin, who sits carefully and tries to read the titles of the books, upside-down. The few he can see don't seem very appealling—*Common Law of the Eastmarch*, *On Heresy*, and *Arosima's Precedents and Judgements*.

"I wanted to ask you if you'd take part in the Hallmote today," Ferrand asks abruptly after a moment.

"I assumed you'd be judge," Jankin says, taken aback.

"Well, as far as that goes I shall. But it's the custom in Applekirk to have eight good folk besides the judge to deliberate, to question, and come to a decision. It's called the judgement of equals."

"Trial by jury," Jankin says. He has read about it. In Marakanda it is used only in cases of murder, arson, or treason.

"Exactly," Ferrand says, looking straight at him. "There are villagers whose accustomed job it is to be jurors when I

hold Hallmote, generally once in Spring and once in Autumn. Usually they know everyone concerned and all about whatever cases are to be heard. Hearings are a case of airing things we all know and getting them clear in front of everyone. This case however..." Ferrand sighs. "This is unprecedented. I have on occasion held court out of season, but never for anything like this. I suppose her accusation against Hanethe is heresy, so Dolkis would be within her rights to demand a Nemet court, which would mean going to Engleram. She hasn't, so she must have some reason for that."

"Engleram is farther west," Jankin points out. "And I haven't heard any accusations except that Hanethe is a traitor and a wrongdoer."

"Not very specific," Ferrand says. "I suppose there is a Nemet court at Belvede too, but she hasn't asked for that either. Whatever her reasons, I can be sure that whatever I do short of handing Hanethe over to Dolkis, will be subject to later scrutiny. Hanethe held the lordship of Applekirk, once. You're an educated man, you're socially closer to being Hanethe's equal than anyone else here, will you serve?"

"I'm a scholar of Marakanda, not a juror of Applekirk," Jankin says. He doesn't want to be part of the Hallmote, because he knows Dolkis will expect him to take her side.

"That doesn't matter. Nobody is expecting you to hold pledge for anyone or to perform any office between courts—that was all settled at our regular Hallmote. You're a free man of good standing, that's all that's needed for you to sit and deliberate with the rest of them."

"I was witness to the events the other day," Jankin protests.

"For that matter so was everyone else. That doesn't matter, it probably won't even come up. The events really in question took place in the East and nobody can bear witness to that except Hanethe." Ferrand takes up a stylus and turns it in his fingers. "It would be useful to me if you agree. It will intimi-

date the others, who are used to each other but a little in awe of you. You might be able to make them think."

Jankin can't think of any more polite way of wriggling out of the duty. "Very well then."

"I'm still considering whether to hear other cases now, with this case among them. The other cases can wait until there's a regular Hallmote, but it might make this seem less peculiar if it is not heard alone. It might help make everyone feel calmer about it."

"I don't think it'll disappear into the background, however you handle it," Jankin says.

Ferrand sighs again. "No, but calming feelings is important." The cat wakes up and yawns widely.

"I very much admired how you calmed feelings the night the villagers came to the manor," Jankin says truthfully, pleased to have a chance to say so.

Ferrand rolls his eyes, unimpressed. "That's easy enough. And they shouldn't be too bad today—they've had the opportunity to see Hanethe acting normally in the harvest field since then. The only danger is Dolkis inflaming them. The good thing is that she's no more likeable than Hanethe is."

Jankin laughs out of sheer surprise. The cat, startled, jumps down from the chair and makes a dash for the door. "Neither of them would win any prizes for conviviality," he agrees.

"So maybe it will be the same as if they were both nice people," Ferrand says wryly. "Anyway, Jankin, try to be a calming influence."

"Right," Jankin says. "I don't know anything much about modern law."

"I know enough, that is I hope I do. I wish Kevan had been to Darragon already and come back trained," Ferrand says, tucking his stylus in his belt and picking a wax tablet and a small box off the desk to join it. "Though I don't suppose Dolkis will have had time to bring in a lawyer either. The villagers do, sometimes, when they're taking each other to justice over some

slight or other, or a foot or so of misplaced land. They come and make the most appalling speeches, though it never does them a bit of good. Come on. Let's get to it."

He leads the way along the corridor to another room Jankin hasn't seen before. The walls are bare stone with high arched windows filled with coloured glass checkered in blue and red. Wooden rails divide the room into sections. The centre section has nine chairs, one of them set on a low dais. The others are empty. Ferrand goes over to a door in the far wall and flings it open. At once a crowd comes in and immediately falls to arguing among themselves and with Ferrand. Jankin, bewildered, stays as close to his host as he can.

His face a mass of wrinkles, the reeve Benoit, comes up to them. "Gooday, lord, how much do you reckon on hearing today?"

"Good day, Benoit. Only this case. The rest can wait until the regular Autumn Mote," Ferrand says. Jankin blinks, bewildered at how decided Ferrand now sounds.

"'T'aint fair," a woman puts in. "Jan Harker's been waiting all season to know if he has leave to wed or no, and half the maidens want to pay their merchet." Jankin scuffs his foot in a shallow groove in the floor, wondering what it is for.

"If I hold Autumn Mote now, Matattha, there'll not be enough to hear come autumn, and if I make everyone wait until Spring who needs to come to court from tomorrow, that's still more unfair," Ferrand says. "Besides, right after the barley's in is a terrible time to marry."

To Jankin's suprise Benoit nods in agreement. The woman, Matattha, steps away frowning. "How many jurors will you be wanting?" Benoit asks.

"Seven," Ferrand says.

"Why, I was sure you'd want a full eight or only five," Benoit says.

"Bad enough that I sit in judgement of my granny without putting the rest of the family up beside me," Ferrand says, put-

ting his hand on Jankin's shoulder. "The eighth juror is Jankin here, a scholar from the West."

The old man looks at Jankin appraisingly. Jankin tries to return his gaze evenly. "Take a chair, then," he says after a moment.

Jankin sits, as ordered. The chaos of the courtroom resolves itself quite quickly. The old man passes on the news that Ferrand would hear only Dolkis's case today, to much muttering. At last the other seats are taken by villagers old Benoit selects by some process that is entirely opaque to Jankin. They are all accustomed to being jurors, and as it is easier to find people uninvolved in this case than for a usual mote, Benoit has selected from the older, wealthier, and more stable villagers.

Dolkis marches in and stands in one of the smaller divisions on the left, to east in the room. Hanethe, supported by Chayra, comes in and stands in the matching division on the right. Hanethe and Chayra are both decently and conventionally dressed for once, Jankin notices with a little regret. Dolkis remains resolutely naked as her calling requires. Her silkwood yeyana catches the light as she looks about her. The villagers not chosen as jurors press to the back of the room, filling almost all the space. Taveth and Ranal come in from the house and stand among them, taking their place next to Marjorane, the harvest queen and Matattha, the woman who wanted the full mote to take place today. She mutters something to Ranal, who shrugs. Everyone is dressed in their best clothes, although there are no flowers in their hair today. Gislain and Timot come in and stand among the villagers. Timot leans on the wall at the back, Gislain walks over and exchanges a few words with Chayra. She has taken the beads and plaits out of her hair and it hangs around her face in loose curls.

Benoit calls for order and the room slowly grows quiet.

Ferrand stands on the dais and draws out the velvet box. "This is an extraordinary Hallmote held in Applekirk on the day after the Day of Mitra, Giver of Harvest," he says for-

mally. He opens the box. Inside are the pearls of Damona. The massed people mutter at the sight. Jankin, who has never seen them before, thinks they look to all the world like three greenish glass marbles of the kind every boy in Marakanda schemes and saves to buy. Benoit comes forward and takes the box from Ferrand. He carries it to Gislain, who touches it and mutters something over it. Then Benoit takes out the pearls. He sets one on the rail in front of Hanethe, a second on the rail in front of Dolkis, and the third in the strange groove in the floor Jankin had noticed earlier.

"Let what is said here today be said in the light of Damona's truth," Ferrand says. At this the pearls begin to glow, casting a yellowish green light onto the faces of the two opponents. It makes Hanethe, whose skin is an even beige, look sickly. Dolkis, with her black skin and sharply pronounced features becomes a mass of angles and shadows. She looks quite devilish, like one of the gargoyles carved on the outside of some nemets. Jankin looks about. Everyone else seems to take these yeyan lights entirely for granted, so he attempts to do the same.

Then Benoit comes shuffling forward with the empty box, closed again. He offers it to the first juror, his own son Lowis. Lowis stands and takes it, bowing to Ferrand. "I am Lowis of Applekirk," he says. "I will listen and speak and judge as best I can in honour, in Damona's light."

The box is passed along the line of jurors, coming at last to Jankin. There is a little murmur among the villagers as he takes the oath. Ferrand takes the box from him and swears in his turn.

"Who brings charge?" Ferrand asks mildly, seating himself on the central seat on the dais.

"I do," Dolkis says, her voice harsh as always. The light before her grows stronger and more yellow. "I am Dolkis, hierophant of Agdisdis." Jankin jumps. He knew it! He had guessed the first time he met her. She has too much author-

ity to be an ambule, whatever she looks like. "I bring charge against Hanethe, daughter of Omarin."

Hanethe jumps. It has been a very long time since she has heard her name given in that form.

"Do you recognise the court and the jurors?" Ferrand asks.

Dolkis runs her eyes over the jurors. "They will serve," she says.

Ferrand looks at Hanethe. "I am Hanethe of Applekirk," she says, her voice cracking a little. "I recognise the court and the jurors."

"What is your charge, Dolkis?" Ferrand asks.

"My charge is that Hanethe of Applekirk has sinned against Agdisdis and must be delivered up to the judgement of the gods." The light does not waver. "She is evil," Dolkis concludes, and although her tone of complete conviction does not change, the light flares and becomes more green, becoming for a moment brighter than the daylight, casting hideous shadows of Dolkis onto the wall behind her.

"Hanethe?" Ferrand asks.

Hanethe hesitates. The light steadies and becomes more yellow, making her look like a gilded statue. She says what she had already decided to say. "I was born in Applekirk. I have been in the East. I have come back. I contend that what I did in the East, although opposed to Agdisdis, was not wrong." The light flickers a little but does not change colour. "I demand that anyone who feels it is, bring specific charges. I will not return to the East to be delivered up to Agdisdis's cruel vengeance."

One of the jurors sitting around Jankin stirs. "You know what you did made the goddess angry?" he asks. "You agree with that?"

"Yes," Hanethe says. "But I deny that it was wrong or that I should face her wrath. I am only a woman, and she is a goddess. It is easy to anger the gods. Who here had never done penance for transgressing their whims?"

"You make it sound as if you did no more than plough under meldram," Dolkis says, her voice full of vehemence. "This woman is evil. Nor is she as harmless as she says. She defied the goddess in the East and fled." The light holds steady. The people mutter.

"Specific charges?" Hanethe repeats. Jankin sees that she is being clever. Dolkis either does not know or does not want to have the specific charges aired in court.

"Dolkis says Hanethe is evil. Does anyone here speak for her character?" Ferrand asks after a moment.

Chayra steps up to the marble set in the floor. The light makes her pale face look quite ghastly. "Chayra of Applekirk," she begins. "Hanethe is my husband's great-grandmother," she says, on sure ground so far. "She has done no harm since she came to Applekirk." The light falters a little on this. "She is haughty and abrasive, but she is not evil. She only an old woman and I speak for her." she concludes, with the light shining steadily. She has spent some time with Ferrand deciding on what form of words she could use without departing from the truth. Admitting Hanethe's faults at once seems like a good idea.

Timot steps up next. He is old and tubby and does not look dignified. Fortunately, the villagers are used to him. "Timot, stable of Liakan. I have spoken to Hanethe and found her as devout as most of us, an educated and cultured woman who has spent time in the East. I have prayed to Liakan and heard nothing from him that speaks against her."

Dolkis looks angry enough to spit.

Gislain follows. "Gislain, ambule of Diktin. I concur with Timot's findings about Hanethe's character. She is undoubtedly well born and respectable. I have also prayed on this matter. My prayers received no direct answer, but after praying I slept and was sent a dream in which Hanethe and Dolkis were standing in the midst of fires, but unburning."

"Diktin agrees that she should be sent back for judgement!" Dolkis interrupts. The villagers murmur.

"Or it could mean that if she is sent back to the East she will be subjected to the torments of the gods, and we should spare her," Gislain says. Hanethe frowns.

"And did you think Diktin approved or disapproved?" Lowis asks.

"I felt no emotion," Gislain says. "It was as if I was being shown a picture. Whether it was of what should happen or would happen or what should be avoided I do not know."

"A very ambiguous oracle," Ferrand says.

A woman comes out of the huddle of villagers. "Orbel of Applekirk, widow," she says. She has a shawl tightly drawn around her, hiding her figure entirely. "I just wanted to say I saw this Hanethe in the harvest, when I was gleaning. I hadn't been in the excitement before, so I didn't know her. I thought she was someone's old granny come for the harvest, but working hard with the harvesters, not trying to get a share of the gleaning. I liked that. She gave me a kind word, and hurried my Nolly back with water for me, so I'd like to speak for her. Who are we to give her up to the gods? What she did away East has nothing to do with us, not really." The light remains gold and firm while she speaks.

The widow disappears back into the mass of villagers. Jankin stares at Hanethe, who is looking after Orbel. She has hit on the central question, he thinks. Did whatever she had done in the East matter here? It clearly matters to Dolkis and to Hanethe, but to the rest of them? He has no idea what any of this is really about. He wonders what she could possibly have done. In stories, Agdisdis is angered by women that Velovis's roving eye has fallen on, but he can hardly believe any man would want Hanethe, let alone a god who could have any woman he chose.

A man comes forward. "I'm not speaking for her, mind, don't set me down as speaking for her." He is addressing Ferrand, who is making notes on the wax tablet.

"Don't be a fool to think the lord would be a fool," Benoit says roughly. "Get on with it, Wyl. And give your name, or the truthlight won't know you."

"I'm Wylkin, Wylkin the Miller," he says, as if addressing someone deaf and witless. Then he half-turns from the light to address his fellow villagers. "Well, I've spoken to Dolkis, and I say the opposite of what Orbel says. What Hanethe did in the East has nothing to do with us. Well and good. But she has nothing to do with us either. She isn't one of ours. We don't know her and she doesn't know us. Let her go back where she came from and be tried fair there for what she did, whatever it was, that has nothing to do with us or Applekirk. She came and brought trouble here. Let her go away and take it with her." There is a murmur that sounds to Jankin like approval. The juror beside him shifts in her chair.

"I was born here," Hanethe snaps. "I am the great-grandmother of your lord Ferrand. I knew the grandfather you were named for, Wylkin—he was a boy when I left, playing by the millrace. I knew your great-grandmother Estrild who worked up here in the kitchens before she married the miller. If I'd asked her before she married, and she'd agreed and gone East as my servant, then if she'd come back with me now would you say she didn't belong?"

The miller looks almost as pale as Chayra at that. "That's all a long time ago, and who's to say?" he says, faltering.

"That was said in Damona's truthlight, you fool," says the juror next to Jankin. "If she hadn't known your granda and his mother her face would have turned liar's blue."

"Well I still say her offense is none of ours and we should send her back," said the miller. He stumps away, leaving the light green behind him. The reference to liar's blue has made it clear to Jankin at last, that green must reflect opinion, and gold truth. He wonders how they can tell. He would like to experiment on one of the globes.

The juror turns to Dolkis. "You say she's evil?" she asks.

"What is more evil than directly offending a god?" Dolkis raps out. Her light goes green again.

"Lots of things," one juror mutters into his beard.

Ranal hands Tydsey to Taveth and comes forward. "Ranal of Applekirk, steward," he says. His skin is almost as dark as Dolkis's and in the reflected light he looks like old verdigrised bronze. "I will speak for Hanethe. Whatever happened away in the East, she has behaved honourably since she came home. She has, as Orbel said, helped with the harvest. She offered to help make yeyana for the village."

"To attack the gods," Dolkis puts in.

"To hold off the power of an angered goddess from innocent folk," Ranal says. "Wylkin says Hanethe brought trouble to us here, but I say that she came here fleeing trouble and has done what she can to hold trouble away from us." He pauses while that sinks in. Several villagers nod. "Also, I want to speak for some who can't speak for her—the children. Hanethe has been teaching the children yeya, our Melly and a handful from the village. She started it right after she came and she's kept it up every day. In the autumn she's going to teach them in the schoolhouse, any children who want to learn to use their yeya. They can't come here and speak for her, so I'm giving them a voice." The light stays a clear gold throughout this.

Ranal stalks back to Taveth's side among the villagers. Taveth does not come forward. She can't honestly think of anything she could say in Hanethe's favour.

Another villager comes up. "Helver of Applekirk, blacksmith," he says. "I want to agree with what Ranal said. My Gisil's one of those learning from Hanethe, and she's got nothing but good from it so far. Hanethe isn't evil, she's teaching the children."

Two more villagers come up after this, endorsing what has already been said without adding much. Then there is a pause.

"Is there more for us to consider?" Ferrand asks.

"I want to ask Hanethe two questions," Dolkis says.

Ferrand nods permission. Hanethe closes her eyes for an instant as if reaching for strength.

"Firstly, if you think you have done no wrong, why will you not return to tell Agdisdis this?"

"I fear the spite of the goddess," Hanethe says, the light steady.

"Secondly, what do you think of these villagers who stand here to judge you?"

"I respect them," Hanethe says, but the light changes through a sickly green to an unpleasant cyan, making her face look like a corpse. The villagers draw away from her, whispering. "No, if you will have stark truth, I do not respect them, I am a lord, not a villager." The light returns to green.

"You despise them, then?" Dolkis asks.

"No." The light stays steady.

"Then what do you feel for them?"

"Pity," Hanethe says, in the steady golden glow of sincerity. Dolkis frowns. The villagers murmur. "I don't know what it has to do with anything of which I might be accused, but I would have done none of it were it not for the fact that I pity them." This is followed by more murmuring.

"I want to know what she's supposed to have done," says the juror beside Jankin. "It makes a difference."

"It's something terrible beyond your comprehension," Dolkis says, her light green.

"It's an Eastern thing, and something very hard to explain so far West, but to the ultimate benefit of humanity," Hanethe says, without her light flickering at all.

"You didn't kill anyone?" Lowis asks.

"No," Hanethe says.

"We will withdraw," Ferrand says, standing. The other jurors stand with him and Jankin hastily scrambles to his feet to follow them out. Everyone gives a little sigh as the door closes behind them.

15

"I wish I could hear their deliberations," Marjorane says to Taveth as the jurors file away behind Ferrand. Jankin is last, following Lowis.

Taveth shifts Tydsey on her aching shoulder. "I've been a juror often enough and it's awful, standing in the little dark room waiting for everyone to agree—for hours sometimes, without food or light or even water."

"Oh, but this time I'd love to hear what they say. I have no idea what they're going to decide, have you?" She glances at Hanethe, who is standing straight, not leaning on the bar, just staring straight ahead at the wall.

"None," Taveth says.

"I wonder whether Hanethe does."

"There's no telling with her," Ranal says. He takes Tydsey, who makes a complaining murmur then settles back into sleep. Taveth rubs her shoulder and then rotates her arm. The joint clicks.

"Everything about this case is strange." Marjorane looks across at Dolkis. "Why didn't either of them want to bring out the facts about what she'd done?"

"I have no idea," Taveth says.

"She hasn't told you either?" Marjorane looks thrilled.

"Not a word," Taveth says.

"It must have been very romantic, defying a god." Marjorane looks at Hanethe's back again. She doesn't look at all like a romantic heroine with her badger-bristle hair.

"I just hope that the way she established that she belongs to Applekirk will carry weight. Several of the jurors are very pious," Ranal says.

Chayra is standing alone against the wall. Marjorane waves to her. She does not come over to them as she usually would. Marjorane crosses over to her, hoping she will be a better source of gossip.

"I hate standing about like this," Taveth says quietly.

"Then go back to the kitchen," Ranal says. "Take Tyds. You didn't speak, you're not bound to wait. You can tell the children what's happened so far, you know they're probably panting to know."

"But if I go I can't come back." Taveth wants to be there when they come out, to hear what they decide.

Benoit calls for quiet.

"If they're not out really fast, then I think we can count on at least an hour," Ranal whispers.

She nods, and a few people creep out through the door behind them.

"We must invite Benoit to dinner soon," she whispers to Ranal. "I don't think he'll last another winter."

"I haven't heard that he's ill," Ranal replies.

"I've never seen him looking older than he does now," Taveth breathes in his ear.

Ranal frowns. He finds his wife's gifts uneasy. "Lowis will be reeve in his father's place. I wonder if he'll find the authority to quell conversation with a frown the way Benoit does. Ferrand will be really sad to lose Benoit."

"I'll miss the old man myself," she says, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

"Ask him to dinner. Lay down some more memories, as your mother used to say."

Taveth looks over at Dolkis and wonders if it helps or hinders Hanethe's case that her opponent looks like a child's drawing of a vengeful goddess. Hanethe rarely shows past

selves; Dolkis never does, as if she is entirely single-minded in being the instrument of her goddess. All she needs is a burning spear and a few snakes in her hair. Taveth shivers and looks away.

Snakes remind her of Jankin, who doesn't love her, who wants everyone he sees with no more discrimination than Tydsey grabbing at everything on the table. He bends over a lizard once where it lies spread out asleep in the sun in the herb garden. "Better not let the cats see that," she says.

"It has such beautiful colours. Each scale is orange with a touch of gold and green," he says, touching a finger to it. "They say lizards are cold, but this one is quite warm."

"It's basking in the sun. They take the heat of their surroundings," she replies, and she sees his face light with that concentrated interest he brings to everything, everything there is.

"Like snakes," he says, and kisses her neck, meaning no more by it—she thinks now in the justice room—than a bee might who goes from flower to flower. The garden is full of bees, there will be summersweet overflowing this year. She will have to ask Chayra to make more jars—two of the old ones have broken and another is cracked. She'll ask for six new ones with lids. On the other side of the courtroom a baby cries, and the mother hushes it by putting it to her breast. Tydsey wriggles in Ranal's arms and begins to wake. Taveth looks down at Tydsey's face, the colour of an old oak plank. Her scrunched baby features are starting to grow out. There is a hint of personality now, the determination and calm intelligence which Taveth has only seen before now in the baby's flickering momentary shadow selves.

Ranal sooths the little murmur with a wordless coo that makes Tydsey smile. "Da," she says, and then repeats it more loudly. "Da, Da, Da!" It seems very loud in the hall. A few people turn to look. Benoit frowns at them.

"I'd better take her out," Taveth says.

Ranal shakes his head and begins to pass Tydsey from one arm to the other, making her chortle happily. It is very familiar to Taveth. She has seen him do this with every baby in the family from Perry on, yet it still strikes her as a strange thing to do. How peculiar babies are, and how very good Ranal is with them. She feels suddenly raensome and kisses his cheek. He looks at her, surprised.

The door at the back opens. Everyone shuffles and whispers, quite drowning out Tydsey's crow of delight as Ranal puts her up on his shoulders. She crows again, recognising Ferrand as he leads the jurors out.

"We are not decided," Ferrand says, as soon as he is back in his chair. "We have some more questions and we are decided consequent to their answers."

"What!" Matattha asks. The general level of murmuring is loud enough for Benoit to hush it angrily. More questions are occasionally needed, but never with a decision pre-made.

"Hanethe, do you believe Agdisdis would kill you if you were in her grasp?" Ferrand asks.

"I..." Hanethe hesitates. The light flickers, then holds green-gold. "I don't know. I would have thought so, until Dolkis came and proceeded this way. Now I don't know. She wants me for something and I know it is nothing good."

"Dolkis? Can you answer this?"

Dolkis turns her head a little as if listening to something. "Agdisdis would undertake not to kill Hanethe, if she might have her back in the East," she says. "There is something Hanethe has, which Agdisdis wants back. She would not kill her if she could have it back."

Hanethe starts, clearly surprised. "I don't know what that is," she says, her light unwavering. "There isn't anything I took that I can give back. I stopped her from acting and now the time to act has passed."

"You can undo what you did. Come into the East and see," Dolkis suggests.

Hanethe frowns. "A journey all the way the Farthest East and back would take ten or even twenty years of Applekirk time and I have undertaken to teach children."

Lowis speaks, stroking his beard as he does so. "You said that here it is hard to explain what you did there, yet it seems impossible to come to a judgement without knowing. Would you agree to a court in Belvede, which is a reasonable journey and where it might be more comprehensible?"

"Agdisdis would agree," Dolkis says immediately.

As Hanethe opens her mouth, Taveth is already calculating the expense of it. Why Belvede, she thinks, where they have nobody to speak for them unless Perry has made good use of her time there. Engleram would be the usual place, if Ferrand's judgement isn't good enough.

"I want to stay here," Hanethe says.

"Then we have a judgement," Ferrand pronounces.

Lowis, incredibly, interrupts. "We said—"

"We said if both agreed," Ferrand reminds him. Lowis throws up his hands and true silence falls, in which Tydsey's cooings can be heard quite clearly.

"We have listened to all that was said and we paid great account to Gislain's vision," Ferrand goes on. "We do not know, cannot know, what was meant by it. Yet equally we do not and cannot know the nature of the quarrel between Hanethe and Agdisdis. First, we would bind Hanethe by freepledge, and although all those who were her pledges when last she lived here have died, we will replace them with those who have spoken for her, if they agree to be so bound."

That's clever, Taveth thinks. One of the ways the countryside stays peaceful is by having everyone responsible for everyone else's behaviour. Binding Hanethe back into that establishes her firmly as a local and also appears to set a restriction and a chastisement on her, without actually doing her any harm at all. Every year at the Spring Mote, the whole village names their pledges, but only those who had been before the Mote

on charges of wrongdoing have to bring their pledgers and formally show that they stand together. Ranal and Chayra and old Orbel and the others take pledge for Hanethe, all of them knowing quite well that she cannot repeat her offence while she stays in Applekirk, and swearing that they will bring her before the Hallmote for the next three sessions, if she lives. Dolkis looks ready to spit, but the feeling of the mote is positive, as if something has been achieved.

"Now," Ferrand says when the pledging is over, "We ordain that on a near day that our priest Timot shall hold as auspicious, there shall be a fire built by the nemet, and that Hanethe and Dolkis both shall stand within that fire and undergo trial by ordeal."

Trial by ordeal is rarely seen in Marakanda, where walking unscathed through a fire would take more yeya than anyone can muster. In Belvede, it is a commonplace. In Applekirk, which is a manor and not a city, it had never happened in living memory, even if Hanethe's memory is, by courtesy, counted.

They bid individual farewells to most of the village, and watch the villagers go off gossiping among themselves. Dolkis stalks off alone. Back in the kitchen, Hanethe looks confident, a confidence which seems to Taveth entirely unfounded. "Timot will set a very near day," Hanethe says.

Taveth is making a hasty dinner and the rest of them are sitting at the table drinking tisanes and getting in her way. A pan of rice is boiling on the fire. Jankin is mercifully absent, wandering about outside somewhere, poking about looking for Marisians. Hodge and Melly are playing with Tydsey in the garden, though Melly keeps creeping inside and touching Hanethe as if for reassurance. It has been a bad season for losing people, Taveth thinks, chopping onions. Oh, she hasn't really lost Melly, Melly is right here, and so for that matter

is Jankin. It isn't like death, which takes people from you. It is almost worse, as if revenants stayed in their places, looking like the people who had loved her but indifferent or hostile now. She chops the onions fiercely, welcoming the burning behind her eyes. She scatters the pieces and has to bend to pick them up again.

"The fire won't burn you up, will it?" Melly asks.

"Not unless Dolkis can break my concentration. Even then it would be breathing the smoke that would kill me, long before I'd start to burn," Hanethe says. She is entirely confident.

"Is there a yeya for it?" Ranal asks.

"If there's a special yeya for standing unharmed in a fire beyond what everyone can do by blowing on their hands, I don't know what it is. But that works, and I can sustain it. I can also figure out what I need to do easily enough. I'm sure Dolkis can too. I will draw cool air from outside the fire and hold it around myself. The danger is that she will use the opportunity to attack me with yeya—if I falter the fire will take me."

"She didn't seem especially happy with the verdict," Ferrand says.

"She liked the thought of taking me to Belvede, where Agdisdis could have reached me directly," Hanethe says. "This gives her a chance, but it gives me the same chance to do that to her."

Taveth throws the onions in the pan where they immediately start to sizzle. She starts to chop a carrot into thin slices.

"I've tried to avoid using judicial ordeals," Ferrand says. "The people like them, but they generally don't serve any purpose. Fire can burn someone innocent as easily as someone guilty, and if lacking the right yeya were a crime, half of us should burn. But the jurors pressed me and I knew you had the yeya. I had to do something that wasn't obviously prejudiced in your favour. They all know you're my great-grandmother and so will

Lord Engleram if Dolkis chooses to appeal to him. She'd be within her rights."

"Would he come here?" Hanethe asks.

"He could," Ferrand says. "I take it you're assuming that the ordeal will be inconclusive?"

Taveth adds the carrots and gives the pan a stir. She takes a sip of her own tisane, which she has set down at the side of the fire to keep warm.

"I think that's the best thing to expect from it," Hanethe says. "There's not much use in planning for if I'm dead, not for me anyway."

"She says Agdisdis didn't want you dead," Chayra puts in. She is looking subdued, and keeps glancing over at where Taveth is working.

"She'd have said anything," Hanethe says.

"She said so in the truthlight," Ranal reminds them.

Taveth interrupts him. "Would you reach me down that ham?"

They all stop and look at her, Hanethe in a "did that dog speak" way that makes her feel she ought to check the yeyana again—except that she checked them only that morning. Ranal gets up and takes down the ham hanging high up, which he can reach with a little stretch but which she would have needed to stand on a chair to bring down. She feels a resentment she never usually feels, wanting to yell that she is making food for all of them while they sit there chattering, and they could at least appreciate that, but she forces herself just to smile and take the ham.

"Can I do anything to help?" Chayra asks tentatively.

"No, thank you," Taveth says, turning her shoulder away from them and starting to slice the ham. "Melly, if you have a minute could you bring me some eggs?"

"How many?" Melly asks.

"One each," Taveth says. Melly races off towards the hen-yard, counting people aloud as she runs. "And Jankin!" she hears, chopping the ham viciously.

"If she really doesn't want to kill me, I don't know what she does want," Hanethe says, resuming after the interruption in a lower tone. "Dolkis said she wanted me to undo what I did, but that's madness."

"Providing you really understand what you were doing," Taveth says.

Hanethe stares at her with that same infuriating expression. Taveth stirs the onions and carrots, which are beginning to brown nicely, then looks back at Hanethe. "What did you do?"

"I can't explain," Hanethe says dismissively.

"Would you be able to tell for sure if you could undo it?" Ferrand asks. He is frowning and staring off into the distance. At least he takes Taveth's thoughts seriously, she thinks.

"It isn't a case of doing something," Hanethe says. "I stopped her doing something. Now she can't do it. I can't undo that—the time for change has passed."

"Are you sure?" Ferrand presses her.

Hanethe opens her mouth to answer, makes a little choking gasping sound and closes it again. She spreads her hands helplessly. "The part of my mind that knew isn't within reach," she says, her voice harsh, but Taveth sees tears starting in her eyes. Chayra puts out her hand and pats Hanethe's arm. As she does, Melly comes into the room, a stream of eggs bouncing along in the air behind her. They all fall several feet towards the floor as she sees Hanethe's distress and Taveth is already wincing as they rise again and settle themselves in a neat spiral in the bowl Taveth had taken out to mix them.

"If you keep doing that, one of these days you're going to have a terribly messy accident," Taveth says.

"No I'm not, did you see? I caught them again. Hanethe's teaching me more control," Melly replies irrepressibly. Then, ignoring her mother, "What's wrong, Hanethe?"

"Just reaching out for something that isn't there," Hanethe says, restored to a semblance of calm.

Taveth takes the eggs individually in her hands, out of the bowl, and puts them down carefully on the table next to Ferrand, who smiles at her absently. Then she begins to break them back into the bowl, one after the other, each round golden yolk and translucent white slipping down to join the others.

"Is there any way you could find out?" Ranal asks. "It's a matter for the gods, so we'd need a priest. Not Dolkis, obviously, but could you ask Timot, maybe, or Gislain?"

"If they knew anything like that they'd have said—they'd not have spoken for me," Hanethe says, staring at the eggs as if she'd never seen one before. Taveth takes a fork and begins to beat them.

"Can you ask the gods yourself, directly?" Chayra asks.

"Gislain asked the gods and received that very ambiguous oracle," Ferrand says, before Hanethe can reply.

Taveth adds salt and a few grains of pepper to the eggs and beats it in.

"I don't think I'd get an answer that was any more clear," Hanethe says.

"I suppose the ordeal might show something?" Ranal asks.

"I find that very hard to imagine," Hanethe says crushingly.

Taveth pours the eggs into the pan on top of the onions and carrots and immediately adds the cooked rice and the ham. She turns it constantly over the heat, coating all the rice with egg. "Set out the plates, someone," she says. "And call Jankin and the children. Dinner's nearly ready." She manages to keep her voice even as she names Jankin. That would show them that she didn't care, she thinks, that she doesn't think of him any differently than any other guest.

She stirs the eggs and rice, half-cooked already and smelling good. She picks up a bowl of shelled peas and pours them in, still stirring. Ranal gets up to call the children, Chayra takes the plates through to the dining room.

"We should find someone to ask," Ferrand says. "We've been behaving as if you are right, but we don't really know. What was the change Agdisdis wanted to make?"

"She wanted all children to be born only within marriage," Hanethe says.

There is silence. Taveth continues to stir the pan, looking at the golden circles of carrot and the egg-coated grains of rice as if they held the answer to the universe. Ferrand stares at his great-grandmother, completely taken aback.

"Well, I suppose even if it was possible to take back what you did so that she could make that change, it is to the benefit of everyone that you don't," Ferrand says. "That doesn't seem too hard to explain?"

"It's the change that's hard to explain," Hanethe says. "And how I stopped her. There are things nobody would understand, things I didn't want to say and things I knew Dolkis wouldn't want to say either, if she even knows. In the East...in the East it isn't possible to be yourself—to be rendsome—to keep yourself separate. Nobody can."

"But you were there?" Ferrand says questioningly. "And now you're here. You must have kept yourself separate somehow."

"Only the gods can," Taveth says, stirring. It is the doctrine of the Nemet, even a child could have said as much.

"I was a god," Hanethe says, smiling bitterly. Outside, Ranal's voice can be heard, calling Jankin to dinner.

"The goddess Hanethe?" Ferrand asks, blankly, but Taveth has understood better.

"Part of a god?" she asks, thinking of the strange shadow she saw behind Hanethe when she first saw her, and again later from time to time.

"That's right," Hanethe says. "And to be part of a god is to have so much yeya, so much ability to think and know and do, that thinking here at all is like trying to fold myself into a snailshell."

Taveth's mind races. Separate and together, part of a god, partly herself. What could that be like? Was that what the gods

were, people cohering to make them, many bodies, one pulsing, changing mind? One mind made up of different smaller similar minds, personalities that were like each other, coming together to make one greater whole? Could one part of that mind act against the rest, reach a different decision, one pair of hands steal something from the goddess as a whole? What would that be like?

"Then which god were you part of?" Ferrand asks.

But Taveth knows before Hanethe answers, knows why Agdisdis will never forgive her and why the other gods cannot protect her from the wrath of the goddess.

Hanethe smiles wryly. "Agdisdis," she says.

Taveth looks at Hanethe over the pan and across the fire. It is hard to believe that this woman had been a god and had done what even the gods dare not do. It was no wonder she is haughty and dismissive, really.

"The food is ready," she says, giving it a final stir. "Let's all sit down and eat."

16

The sun is barely up and the early morning sky through Hanethe's window is black with skazlorls. Summer is ending, but there is not much chance of rain putting out the fires today. She knew all along that Timot, eager to get rid of Dolkis, would choose an early day, but even so she was surprised to see him knock on the door the evening after the Hallmote.

"Tomorrow at sunset would be auspicious," he says, his hand on his yeyana. "It is the feast day of Aleth, lover of Liakan."

He looks at Hanethe as if to remind her that he had done as much for her as he could, and that she had promised him to get rid of Dolkis. Aleth was turned into a bay tree by Agdisdis, she remembers. She agrees to the time, trying to appear as if she has a choice, or at least as if she does not mind that she has no choice.

It is so strange to be separate and to contemplate death calmly. Yet when it comes to it, what is she living for, if living means living crippled in her mind, grubbing among the grubbers? She lived in Applekirk when she was young only until she could escape Eastward. Now she fears the East is closed to her forever, whatever happens. In some ways death seems very seductive. Death would take her to the East, where no god would catch at her soul. She would be swept on, over the edge of the world into the unknown, the soul-lands east of East. She had seen them far off, when she was Agdisdis, patches of ever-changing colour like blossoming flowers. Yet she is not ready to die, to give up her individual existence. Besides, she fears

that Agdisdis is not done with her and, dead, it would be much harder for her to resist the goddess.

She traces old fine scars on her arms with her fingernails. Pain cancels out pain. They are a map of her life, which began well enough, then twice left all stories and expectations—first when the plague came and then again when she left the East. She did her duty, and then she followed her lifelode, and at last she became a god, and after… she sighs. There isn't supposed to be any after, but now there is Melly. If not for Melly she would start walking west and keep walking until thought stops, somewhere beyond the carved streets of Marakanda. But there is Melly, and Gisil and the others. She had not expected their parents to speak for her in the mote. Her nails become less insistent. She does not believe she will die today. Dolkis will not kill her but deliver her back to the East. She wishes she understood why Agdisdis wants her. She thinks and thinks about what she did, and feels the pressure of the change that did not happen sit like a weight inside her, like a child pressing on her womb. Dolkis says she stole the change, and if so perhaps she still contains it in some way.

She watches the patch of sun crawl over the wall. Before it reaches the bed she hears Melly's feet outside and her door swings open.

Here is the only person who will truly miss her if she dies or is carried off to Agdisdis, the only one who cares. "I knew you were awake," Melly says.

"I am awake," Hanethe confirms.

"Can I come into bed with you?" Melly asks.

Hanethe recoils for a moment. Then long buried memories stir, herself as a very small child in the tower room creeping into bed beside her parents to be told a story. "You're getting too old for that," she says, moving over to make room.

"That's what Taveth says, but my feet are cold." Her feet, touching Hanethe's side as Melly crawls under the covers, are icy.

"Summer's over," Hanethe says. "Did you see the skazlorls?"

Melly's eyes turn to the window for a moment but not even skazlorls can hold her attention. "I'm afraid," she says.

"What do your patterns tell you?" Hanethe asks, the question she has not asked. She has not wanted to know.

Melly frowns. "They told me you had come here to teach me, and surely they wouldn't just have meant for a month or so. But they're threads of what has happened leading on to what will happen, ought to happen, they aren't like reading a book. They seem to say you could easily be lost today. There's a time ahead not far off when I could be lost. It's in the pattern."

"It's not impossible that Agdisdis could claim me in the fire," Hanethe says calmly, although at the words she feels a chill sweep through her even colder than the child's feet. "If I die or am taken, keep on with your practice—what I have taught you, especially with control. Control is a great deal of what matters with yeya. In a few years your parents will send you East. When you go to Belvede you may find my old pupil Parmen, who should still be alive. He will teach you." Melly is silent beside her, her face rigid. "It may seem a long time now, but it will pass quickly," she says.

"Don't die," Melly says, and her face cracks, crumples, her lip quivers, her eyes overflow, and she flings herself on Hanethe and weeps like the small child she is. Hanethe puts her arms around Melly awkwardly. This is not something she foresaw when she claimed mother-right. She pats Melly awkwardly.

"I won't die if I can help it," she promises.

"I'll watch you, I'll help you," Melly says, her words muffled. Hanethe soothes her and rocks her until she is calm again.

The day passes slowly. After breakfast Ranal, Chayra, and Jankin go off about their separate businesses. Taveth bus-

ies herself around the kitchen as usual, with Perry helping. Ferrand tries to make conversation with Hanethe, but neither of them can put their heart into it. He wants to ask what it is like to be a god, but cannot find a way to approach the subject. She goes out after a while, taking Melly, and finds the other children of the village who have yeya. She teaches them to make the air glow in different colours and how to change the colours and the balance of brightness to make pictures. It requires precision and concentration, which is good for all of them. Melly keeps losing pictures just at their moment of completion, as her excitement blurs her focus. Nan is best at it. Hadley's pictures have the most imagination. He shows a bustling city market, which he has never seen except in dreams, and a unicorn drinking at a forest pool, in his imagination silver-stippled like little house lizards. Hodge watches for a while, until Hanethe notices that his attention makes Melly's concentration falter, whereupon she chases him off. They eat an early, gloomy dinner, which Hanethe as usual finds overspiced and Jankin bland.

"Do you have any preparations to make?" Ferrand asks Hanethe, as Taveth and the children clear away the plates.

Hanethe bites back an uncharitable response and simply shakes her head. Ferrand then offers her his arm, in courtly fashion, and they walk down to the nemet at the head of a little procession consisting of the rest of the family and Jankin. Their shadows stretch out before them as the sun slips down into the West at their backs. Fireflies dance around them, little flashes of pink and silver and gold. Once they come out of the gates of the manor some villagers join them, so there is quite a crowd at her back when Hanethe comes into the clearing behind the nemet.

A huge bonfire has been laid but not yet lit. It is topped with a rough wooden platform bearing two straight upright poles. Hanethe hopes she isn't to be bound to one of them. Dolkis is standing in the doorway of the nemet, her hand on her yeyana

and her head cocked, as if listening. Timot and Gislain are down in front of the bonfire, consulting.

She raises a hand to Timot, who walks over to greet her.

"We will begin by invoking the gods, with the two of you on the platform," he says, without pausing for any courtesies. "Then it will be a matter of who first chooses to leave the fire."

"Or burns up," Hanethe cannot resist adding, relieved she was not to be bound.

"Yes," Timot says, frowning a little at her humor.

"May justice be done here today," Ferrand says, quite loudly. "Aid us, Damona!"

Dolkis comes out and advances towards the fire.

"Thank you for your support, Ferrand," Hanethe says, taking her hand from his arm. They stand and stare at each other for an instant, unsure how to bid each other farewell. At last they clasp each other's arms, as if they were cousins, then Ferrand brushes that away and embraces her as close kin. He whispers something that begins "Good—" but everyone starts shouting as Dolkis swings herself up onto the platform and Hanethe misses the end of it. She smiles at him and at Melly, wanting to collapse and cry and howl as Melly had that morning, but forcing herself to go on calmly. At least she has had practice with going on calmly, though never before into fire.

She goes forward to the fire and with Gislain's help clambers up onto the platform. Dolkis sneers down at her. She has a hand on the eastern pole, so Hanethe takes the western. Their eyes lock for a moment, then they both deliberately look out into the crowd. She does not like Dolkis, in fact she hates her, but she understands her better than she understands most of the people here. Dolkis wants power and she wants to serve the goddess. That is as clear as if she had it carved on her naked skin. But these villagers, who are all shouting and calling out? What do they want? What are their lives that this could seem like entertainment? She thinks of the night they came against the gates with torches, and of the big miller who said at the

Hallmote that she is none of their concern. Doubtless many of them would be glad to see her burn.

Gislain gives a blessing as the sun sets. Abruptly everyone falls silent and sits cross-legged and reverent on the ground, transformed as if by yeya from screaming beasts into a calm and quiet congregation.

Timot takes up the prayer bowl. It is the same ancient prayer bowl that belongs to the nemet for as long as her memory reaches, made of bronze that is cast and then beaten. He sets it flat on the palm of his hand and sits down by Gislain before the fire. Gislain hands him the stick, old and wooden, but not the stick Hanethe remembers from her youth. Wood does not last the way bronze does and it has been a long time. Timot begins to draw the stick carefully around the rim of the bowl. As soon as he begins Gislain bows to the piled wood, which obediently leaps into flame. For now the fire stays below the platform and only smoke rises to where the two women stand. It is no challenge for Hanethe to draw cool air from beyond the circle of the clearing, so there is no need yet to take precautions against heat or flames. Dolkis does not take the opportunity to attack. She keeps one hand on the pole and the other on her yeyana. All of her attention seems to be on Timot and the bowl.

At first the note from the bowl is barely audible above the crackling and popping of sticks taking flame, then it grows and swells until it fills the air. It is the prayer note of Liakan, which Timot is practiced in drawing from the bowl. When it reaches full volume, quite drowning the fire, the flames catch a good hold and Hanethe needs to hold her defences against them. As the colour is beginning to fade from the sky, the first note is joined by a second note, much higher. She guesses from Gislain's ecstatic face that it is the note for Diktin. The two notes revolve around each other for a while and everyone sits unmoving, watching Timot's hand turning and the fire burning, caught in the sound, which is almost palpable.

Then a third, deeper note joins them, a note which runs through Hanethe bone deep. This is the note of Agdisdis, a note as familiar to her as the beat of her heart. As it rises and grows purer she is filled with an unexpected and powerful homesickness for the East, for Agdisdis, for what she had been—her self completed in the goddess. The three notes weave together. Hanethe looks away from the bowl, trying to separate herself as best she can from the note. Dolkis's face, lit from below by the flames, is full of sly triumph. Married couples in the congregation are holding hands. The sky is darkening to dusk. Fireflies can be seen clearly now. People are swaying forward as they sit, towards the centre, the fire, the priests. Timot looks most unlike the old man she had talked to. He is deep in the sound which is being drawn from him, as it is from the bowl. Jankin, sitting immediately behind the priests, is rapt but somehow still curious. Melly is looking up at Hanethe and Dolkis, where tongues of flame are beginning to lick through the platform. Hanethe is safe, but she cannot let her concentration waver. When Timot stops, Dolkis will attack, as before in the harvest-field. She holds herself ready.

The three notes reach a pitch that is almost unbearable and still Timot keeps circling the stick. He could stop the sound with a touch on the bowl's rim or he could strike the bowl and ring out a single chime, but he chooses to keep circling, keep the three notes cycling through each other, above, below, between, in endless sound that is and is not music. There seems no reason he would not do it forever.

Dolkis suddenly sags forward on the platform, letting go of her pole.

There is light in the heart of the brass bowl, pink light, quite different from the blues and oranges of the fire. Timot's hand falls away but the notes still hang on the air. The light rises from the bowl in a spiral, like smoke on the wind, filling the clearing, rising, forming a great shape in reds and pinks against the dusky sky. It is Agdisdis herself, or rather her shadow, come

to the summons. Dolkis lies on the platform, flames licking around her, slumped like a puppet whose strings have been cut. The shadow of Agdisdis rises high against the sky, three times the height of the nemet. Her face is that of a beautiful older woman—concerned, forgiving, hopeful. There are snakes coiled in her hair, she holds a burning spear, and two pink swans lie at her feet.

She stretches out a hand towards the fire. "Come home, Hanethe," she says, within her prayer note, using the wind for breath so that the fire leaps up, burning twice as fiercely as before. "I forgive you. I need you. Come back." Her eyes are understanding and compassionate. Behind her hangs a canopy of gold.

Hanethe knows how much effort this must take. To manifest this far west, even as smoke, even with all that has been done, must be taking almost all of Agdisdis's attention. "What have I done to deserve this?" she asks, still keeping up her defences against the fire, against the smoke, against any sudden attack from Dolkis. The need to control her yeya helps her to resist the goddess, who is her other self. She does not step forward or make any effort to take the hand the goddess extends. She clutches her yeya and holds herself to herself, as she did when she escaped. She catches herself within the barricades around her wounded soul, she defines herself as Yeyan Hanethe, who pities the people and will let them have babies when they will, who will not be lightly moved, and throws up strong barriers against incursions.

"Come home," Agdisdis says again. Now her presence is like being home, is all Hanethe had been and missed being, thought itself moving as fast as darting minnows, the soft touch of silk, the exercise of power, so that remaining separate seems a foolishness like cutting off a hand rather than accepting help untangling a sleeve from a bramble.

Hanethe breathes and holds still as the struggle moves into her head. Then she becomes aware of someone brushing past

her, touching her, in the fire. She looks down, ready to lash out, expecting some kind of distracting attack from Dolkis, but to her astonishment sees that Melly has jumped up onto the platform and is tugging at Dolkis's prone form. She blinks and comes close to losing control of her defences.

"She's burning!" Melly calls. Hanethe peers down at Dolkis. Melly is right. She looks back at the goddess hanging in the sky, and is torn for an instant, her Hanethe-self seeming as small as a grain of sand and her Agdisdis-self as vast as eternity. What is Dolkis, whom she hates, why should she not use her and leave her to burn? Then she sees a spark take hold on Melly's sleeve and without thinking extends her physical defences against the fire to cover the child as well, and is closed again behind her yeyan barricades. "Help me," Melly says, dragging Dolkis forward. Hanethe doesn't want to help Dolkis, but she needs to get Melly out of the fire quickly.

"Hanethe!" Agdisdis calls again. Again her voice makes the fire burn faster and brighter. The snakes in her hair writhe and reach out. "I need you. Return to me that which you took from me, that which is mine!"

Hanethe doesn't even look. She bends to help Melly with Dolkis, pulling the three of them down from the fire in a shower of sparks, drawing them towards the priests. The great coloured shadow of the goddess leans forward as if to scoop them up. Hanethe sees Jankin reach out and set a fingertip on the rim of the bowl on Timot's lap. Then the music stops, she is clear of the fire, the goddess is gone, and everyone is beating out sparks. Gislain starts to force air into Dolkis's lungs. Hanethe stands dazed before Timot.

"And if the gods don't take much interest in us, what do we conclude from this?" he asks her, very quietly.

Hanethe shakes her head, trying to shake out Agdisdis's presence. She had wanted to go back, for a moment, had longed for it. Hanethe knows that leaving was a mistake, that her truest self is a goddess, part of a goddess, and yet all that she is

as herself knows she was right to stop the change. She cannot speak, cannot answer Timot, cannot even look into his ironic old eyes.

"She used Dolkis and then dropped her to die in the fire," Melly says, behind them, furious, shaking off Taveth's hand from her shoulder.

"There is something going on I don't understand," Hanethe says, in answer but no answer, and she turns her eyes up to search the empty sky. "I think I must hold it still. I must leave and go farther west," she says.

17

In the deepnight after the burning, Chayra creeps into Jankin's room and wakes him with a hand over his mouth. With far more knowledge of what is provocative than Taveth, she has lit the candle, and is wearing Hanethe's cape and a chateleine's string of red clay beads looped around her hips.

Well, Jankin thinks, as she pulls down the covers, might as well be burned for a goat as for a kid.

Making love with Taveth, he always thinks of the Westmarch imagery of ploughing fields—she is the field and he the plough and the rain. Chayra is more inventive and more changeable. She calls his plough a cock. "Why?" he asks, whispering, and she laughs. She says when men are seen from behind, bent over, their cocks dangle between their legs, red or black like the wattles of a rooster. It seems very much a woman's vision, a woman's word. They play, she teases him, and then they wrestle, where he discovers with surprise how strong she is. They giggle quietly, trying not to disturb anyone. Then she yields all at once and after that it is even harder to be silent.

Lying awake afterwards, stroking Chayra as she sleeps, Jankin can't help comparing the women. Chayra has technique but Taveth has sincerity, he thinks, and envies Ranal and Ferrand who go from one woman to the other at will. He wakes her and is stirred to another arousal. He tries to pay attention to her, but she is too busy trying to please him. This doesn't please him, though he can't explain why.

She is gone when he wakes.

❖ ❖ ❖

Hanethe sleeps uneasily. All night Agdisdis moves through her dreams, seeking the moment of the lost change, the change she did not make. Hanethe feels pregnant with the moment, and afraid that if she relaxes she will become Agdisdis and make the change though she does not will it. She wakes herself and lies alert, hugging her arms around her wrinkled body. She holds onto herself as tightly as she can and in every creak of wood and every cat-step in the hall she imagines some new threat coming towards her. She does not dare risk the vulnerability of sleep. "In the morning, I will say goodbye to Melly and go west," she whispers to herself. She watches the sky turn pale and colour seep back into the world, blues first, then the other colours, moving like spirits into the shapes they fled at nightfall. When Melly comes to her they go out to find the other children she has been teaching, to say goodbye.

❖ ❖ ❖

Jankin comes down to breakfast early and hungry. Chayra is not at the table. Hodge is, and Ranal. Taveth seems a shade more forgiving this morning. She meets his eyes for a second as she pours his tisane.

"There are some ruins by the marsh in the woods," Ranal says. "I don't know if they're the ones you're looking for."

"What are they like?" Jankin asks, excited.

"Fallen stones with moss on, as far as I can remember," Ranal says. "Why don't you go and look at them?"

Jankin has been casting about for some time with no luck finding anything beyond the stones in the gate he found the first afternoon.

"I'll show you," Hodge says. "I said I'd help and I know where they are."

But Hodge cannot lead Jankin straight to them. They find them after a little scrambling about in the woods disturbing the pigs. Jankin is initially alarmed until Hodge tells him they are tame pigs belonging to the villagers or the manor, out here fattening up for autumn. The woods are easy to walk in, probably because the pigs eat any undergrowth, Jankin thinks, watching a black and pink sow snuffling under a tree.

The ruins are as Ranal says, a pile of moss-covered stones. They lie on far side of the woods near the edge of the marsh where the trees give way to willow and reeds. With a distinct feeling of pride Jankin realizes at once there is not much doubt that this unprepossessing pile of stones had been a Marisian tower. It was most probably a startower, which would explain its location out here away from the village on the road, to be sure of unbroken darkness. He walks around it examining the stones and decides to do a proper excavation so he can write it up to help make a name for himself back at the Academie. He starts to pick off some moss.

"What's this?" Hodge calls. He is standing at the edge of the marsh, ankle deep in water, poking at something with a stick. Jankin hadn't noticed him go. He walks over. What Hodge has seen out in the reeds is a circle of stones, green with slime and almost under the water even at this season.

Jankin peers at it, wondering for a moment, then all at once it becomes clear. "It's a well," he says.

Hodge looks at him in barely concealed disbelief. "A well? In the water?"

"It's been a long time," Jankin says, the weight of time striking him afresh as he looks at the sunken stones. "This water has risen. When they built this tower the water was sufficiently far underground that they needed to dig a well. It has slowly come closer and closer to the surface."

A golden heron flaps slowly across the water in front of them. Hodge pokes at a reed and disturbs a frog, which hops

off, protesting. "I'd never thought how much time there has been," he says.

"Let's go back," Jankin says. "I need to draw this tower as it is and then start to move the stones to see if there's anything left. I'll need tools, which Ranal probably has. Maybe we could start this afternoon."

"What will we find?" Hodge asks, starting to lead the way back.

"Now if I knew that we wouldn't need to look," Jankin says, then takes pity on the boy. "I hope to find something that will tell me who they were and what they wanted, some things they left, maybe some of their rubbish. Broken pots might tell me if they made pots here or brought them from the West, it might tell me what they ate."

Hodge frowns, then gets it. "Oh, you mean if they had soup bowls it would tell you they ate soup?"

"Exactly. Or we might find some of their equipment. This was a startower, I think, where they came to watch the stars and measure them. They might have had a stone or metal chart which could have survived." Jankin shrugs. "It isn't very likely. They used parchment the same as everyone else. But it's not impossible. Or there might be something personal. Once, under a pile of very boring broken pots, I found an early Marisian gold comb with red enamel flowers on it. One tooth was broken, so the woman who used to wear it in her hair three thousand years ago had thrown it away."

"Where is it now?" Hodge asks eagerly.

"In a case in the Academie. It didn't belong to me even though I found it. And anything we find here will belong to Ferrand, though if any of it is very interesting I might ask him if I could take it to the Academie too. Land belongs to the lord."

"If it's very interesting he might want to keep it," Hodge says. "Or, as he doesn't care about the Marisians at all, I might."

"If it was in Marakanda everyone could see it, without needing to come all the way here," Jankin begins, then laughs. "Don't

make a pie with one bud! Here we are squabbling over how to divide the treasure when we haven't even found so much as a broken plate!"

"Three thousand years old," Hodge says. "What do they say in Marakanda about time?"

Jankin looks at him, surprised. "Lots of things," he says. "What do you mean in particular?"

"When it started," Hodge says. "How the world began. How old it is. Where people came from."

"Well, they say lots of things about that too," Jankin says, smiling. "But the one my teacher liked best was the idea that the gods made the world as a refuge. Gods and people used to live in some other world and there was a danger there, whether to gods or people I don't know. Then the gods made this world and brought in some people—people, Gavre suggests, from all over that world, with different languages and customs and appearances. That's just a guess. But there's a legend in Marakanda that all the gods cared about was the East, which is the only place they can live, after all. The people they brought lived there, but some of them seeped out into the Marches and the West, where people can live their own lives."

"Is it true that in the far West, farther than Marakanda, people are like dolls that do the same things over and over and don't think?"

"I don't know." Jankin stares at an oak tree, seeing it and thinking of the West. "I haven't been that far West. They do say thoughts slow down. And where I come from, which is a village two days walk west of Marakanda, they say that asking questions is an Eastern thing to do. My nickname as a child was Easter, because I asked the most questions. I'm wondering now if I'm thinking faster here, but it's very hard to tell. It's been very exciting since I've been here, which encourages fast thinking anyway. It's really hard to quantify."

Hodge frowns and jumps over a tree stump, then stops and looks at Jankin. "You could try learning something every night

on your way home, a long poem with lots of lines, and see if the number you learned went down."

"I could, and a positive result would mean something, but a negative result wouldn't, because memorizing is different from the kind of thinking that causes people to ask questions. If they do the same thing every day, they could learn poetry, couldn't they? Though they might not want to in the first place."

"You could count the questions you asked per day?" Hodge suggests, leading the way once more.

"Possibly," Jankin says, considering it. "It would be easier if someone else counted, and it would be better yet if I counted someone else's questions, without their knowing what I was doing. After all, knowing about it could cause awful self-consciousness one way or the other."

"What's different between here and Marakanda?" Hodge asks.

"Oh, lots of things. Only some of them to do with east and west though, lots of them because Marakanda is a city and Applekirk is a village. The main east-west difference I notice is yeya. Yeya increases slowly but definitely as you move eastwards."

"What's yeya for?" Hodge asks.

"I don't think that's the right question," Jankin says. "Yeya is, and people use it for things. It isn't necessarily for anything, in the way that a bowl is for eating soup. There's a wonderful example in Keziar, let me see if I remember." Jankin thinks for a minute, getting the words in order, then quotes. "Having established that dogs use their tail for cooling, protection, and for passing information to others, what can we say is the purpose for which dogs grew their tails? Or does it make sense to say that the tails were grown for many purposes? Or might we consider the notion that dogs, discovering this extraordinary piece of flesh dangling behind them, at once put it to as many uses as their canine minds and bodies could contrive?"

Hodge laughs. "So yeya's like the dog's tail in that example? But you don't have any in Marakanda?"

"There's some. There's not much to notice in Marakanda, not like here where it's everywhere. It's easier for your mother to knot a charm against dust than to sweep a room, whereas a dust charm would leave my mother exhausted for days. So she sweeps."

"It's Taveth who does our dust charms, mother is too busy," Hodge says absently.

"I thought Taveth was your mother?" Jankin is taken aback—he has forgotten learning this before during the excitement of defending the manor, perhaps due to the yeyan mood at the time.

"I would have thought you knew that by now. Chayra's my mother and Tydsey's mother. Taveth's *Melly's* mother," Hodge explains patiently. "Oh, and she's Kevan and Perry's mother as well," he adds offhandedly.

"Perry doesn't like me," Jankin says, the words coming out before he considers whether he wants to say them or not.

"I expect it's that you have her bedroom and she has to sleep in the sewing room where everybody forgets and walks through," Hodge says. "Or it might be because of Taveth and Chayra. You really are silly. You should have talked to Taveth if you wanted Chayra too.

"Sometimes I act without thinking at all," Jankin says.

"Usually that means moods on the wind," Hodge says. "But there are yeyana in your window, I know there are, I put the herb bundle there myself. The little wooden lizard with the painted stripe is in there. In my room I have a wooden bear with his arms up. The yeyana keep off moods coming out of the East. You can usually tell if they're not working. Another sign is if everyone feels the same, grumpy or impulsive or whatever. I don't suppose you have that in Marakanda?"

"Never," Jankin says. "I'm not used to it."

Then they come out of the woods and see the army approaching.

Taveth goes out into the orchard after breakfast to wash clothes. The stoneflowers are blooming all along the edge of the square trough where she does the wash. Taveth likes to see them even though she knows they mean summer will soon be over. Autumn has its own joys—soon would be jam season and apple picking. The sun is shining and a little southerly breeze comes up through the orchard and tugs at her hair. It will be a good drying day, she thinks, if she ever gets the smocks clean. She kneels on the ground and rubs a handful of harsh soap into Ferrand's smock, which happens to be on top. As always, the soap brings up the grime. The smock, which had looked tan, immediately looks grey and filthy. She takes the soap by the handful, rubbing it unsparingly into the dry material. There is no shortage of soap and when it runs out she will make more.

The trough is full of clean water. She plunges the smock into it and at once the water turns grey and unappetising. Her hands itch a little. She turns at once to the next smock, Hodge's, which at least gives no illusions of being clean. When she has scrubbed them all and they have soaked, she will ask Hodge or Melly to carry the basket down to the stream to rinse them. The children always enjoy playing with water, and it would do Melly good to be away from Hanethe, who is getting ready to leave. Taveth scrubs the smock hard. She can't blame Hanethe, but she can't like her either. She sighs. She thinks she will be glad when Hanethe has gone, but is worried about how Melly will deal with it.

Chayra's smock is next. It is neat and embroidered with cornflowers and it somehow looks like Chayra herself. She is off in her workshop making pots, as usual. Normally that would have made Taveth glad. She likes Chayra, and for Chayra to be absorbed in her work is just how things are supposed to be. Now though, she plunges Chayra's smock into the water, which is almost black and has a thin scum on top of it. Now she feels boring, she feels as if she is only Taveth, who keeps everything going and who isn't appreciated. Keeping house is

her lifelode—though she shouldn't feel she needs thanks for it, suddenly she does. Chayra is younger and prettier, so of course everyone prefers her, of course Jankin is after her. Ferrand and Ranal love her too—she knows they do—but they love her as they love their familiar warm winter quilts or as they love roast apples from the orchard.

The next smock is Ranal's, the largest, and as dirty as Hodge's. She is going to need more clean water for soaking. She has no idea where Hodge is. She calls to him, but gets no answer.

Ranal comes up the garden path towards her. As so often, he has Tydsey in her sling on his back. "I think Hodge went off to show Jankin the old tower," he says. "They headed off that way after breakfast and I haven't seen either of them since. What did you want him for?"

"Only to fetch more water," Taveth says. "Look at the colour of this already."

"Dark," Ranal says, staring down at his reflection in the dirty scummy water.

"Gak," Tydsey echoes.

"I could fetch you some clean water," Ranal says after a moment.

"Aren't you busy?"

"Izz," Tydsey says.

"I walked down to watch the gleaners, making sure everything is all right," Ranal says. "There are no problems, no strangers come this year, nobody trying to claim privilege who doesn't have it. The field will be picked quite clean before it's time for me to plough it again. But right now, love, I have time to fetch you as much water as you need."

"Thank you," Taveth says. She watches him carrying the buckets to the well, swinging them from the ends of his arms as if they weighed nothing. Tydsey is bouncing on his back and chanting nonsense syllables. Taveth keeps rubbing soap into Ranal's smock. She pulls out the plug under the trough that lets

the dirty water run out and soak into the ground. He comes back soon, the heavy pails barely slowing him down. She pulls the soaked clothes from the trough and he pours the clean water in. She pushes his smock under, forcing the air out of it.

"It looks as dirty as before," Ranal says.

"Not quite," Taveth says. "I'll rinse them all at the stream. Melly can help if Hodge is away with Jankin, or Kevan if she's busy too."

"Ooooh!" Tydsey crows.

"Kevan will be leaving soon. Summer's almost over. Lowis has asked a caravan to call here to take Hilden and Kevan to Darragon. It could come any day now."

"Will you miss him?" Ranal asks.

"Miss him and be glad he's gone, both," Taveth says.

"He's been a lot less impossible recently, but it's time he went. He needs to grow up." Ranal bounces Tydsey, who laughs.

"He can't compete with Hanethe on the impossible front," Taveth says.

"Darragon's west," Ranal says reassuringly. "Kevan will be back almost before we know it. He'll pass through Margam on the way. He can see your mother and my parents. Perhaps we should have him take them something."

Taveth takes up Melly's smock and the soap and begins to rub it in. "I wonder if our children will settle near us or far away?" she muses. "Hodge will stay here of course, and I suppose Melly will go East. But there's no telling with Perry and Kevan, or you, little Tydsey."

"Tyd," Tydsey says.

"Was that a word?" Taveth asks. "Did you say Tyd, or were you just echoing again?"

"Tyd," Tydsey says. "Tyd, Tyd, Tyd."

"What do you say?" Ranal asks her. "Is that talking?"

"Tyd!" Tydsey insists, at the top of her voice. "Tyd!"

"Yes, we know you're Tyd," Taveth says. "Hello, Tyd."

"Tyd," Tydsey confirms.

"Strong sense of self this little one's got," Ranal says.

"Like her mother," Taveth says, without quite meaning to.

Ranal frowns. "Is there something wrong between you and Chayra? Jankin's a fool, but I wouldn't have thought he could shake you up like this."

"I think it's partly Jankin and partly all this with Hanethe," Taveth says. She plunges Melly's smock under the cold water and her hands feel the shock of it. "Chayra...oh, you know Chayra, you know what she's like. I don't mean to be shaken up. I can't help it. I feel as if I'm behaving like her, wanting reassurance, wanting to feel loved, when normally I'm just comfortable getting on with things."

"It isn't like you," Ranal says. "Not something else blowing in on the wind?"

"I don't think so," Taveth says. "I just feel a bit dull, boring you know?"

"You?" Ranal looks at her in such astonishment that Taveth laughs. "Jankin will be gone soon," he says.

"Tyd," Tydsey says, on a rising note. "Tyd, Tyd, Tyd, Tyd!"

"That almost sounds like a song," Taveth says. "Don't worry about me, Ranal."

"You say that, but if I didn't worry you'd worry that I hadn't noticed," he says. "So really you want me to."

"I suppose I do," she says, smiling. "I'd hug you, except that it would get you wet." She takes Jankin's smock and begins to rub soap into it.

"Save it up," he advises. "Do you need any more water? If not, I'm going to look at the sheep. Want to look at sheep, Tyd?"

"Izz!" Tydsey declares.

"That's wonderful, Tydsey, you really are talking," Taveth says.

Hodge comes running into the garden from the direction of the orchard.

"Tydsey's really talking," Ranal tells him before he has even come to a halt.

"Tyd!" Tydsey confirms.

"Soldiers," Hodge says, panting, bending at the waist, run quite out of breath. "Soldiers coming up out of the East. They're not here yet, but they will be soon."

Ranal doesn't hesitate, he runs straight for the house to give the alarm.

"Where's Jankin?" Taveth asks, drawing herself to her feet.

"Coming along behind. He told me to go ahead because I'm faster and know the way better. He knew they were soldiers. They look like a caravan, but they flash. He said that was weapons—spears, he said. I wouldn't have known on my own. Do you think they're coming for Hanethe? Do you think Agdisdis sent them? Do you think they're going to attack us?"

"I don't know," Taveth says. "But I think it would probably be best if we were all to prepare for the worst."

18

Ferrand's first thought as soon as he knows the family is safe is to get the villagers inside the gates. When Jankin comes up panting, he is sent off at once to knock on every door.

"Don't you want to know who is coming, how many they are?" Jankin asks. For once—Ferrand counts it a blessing—he does not add the "Why?" which is ever on his lips.

"I can find those things out after everyone is safe, but I can't get everyone safe after I know," Ferrand says. "There are eight hundred people out there who look to me for protection. Get down to the village and get everyone inside the walls."

"Isn't there some yeya for warning them?" Jankin asks, still hesitating. His legs and lungs ache from the running he has done already.

"Not unless you know any," Ferrand says, out of patience but with much to do.

Chayra comes running up, her sword in her hand. She doesn't even glance at Jankin. "I'm going to the gate," she says. "Coming?"

"I'm going to wake the yeyan defences," Ferrand says.

Chayra raises an eyebrow and runs on towards the gate, overtaking Jankin. Kevan comes pelting along when Jankin is just outside the gate, before he has reached the first of the houses. "You do these, I'll go to the fields and then down past the nemet," he calls. Jankin's breath is catching at the top of his throat. He raises a hand in acknowledgement as Kevan runs past him.

When he comes to the first house he bangs on the door. An old woman answers. "Soldiers coming. Get up to the manor," Jankin croaks. He doesn't wait for her response but runs on. There may be eight hundred people, he thinks, but there are barely a hundred houses.

Kevan warns the gleaners, who are still picking over the barley field. After he has absorbed the first shock of knowing there are attackers coming, Kevan starts to enjoy himself. Something is happening, and there is something necessary for him to do, where he can make a contribution that is not token. He is not being treated as a child. Chayra has trusted him to do an adult's job, beside Jankin. He passes Jankin again as he makes his way along the straggle of houses along the road. The villagers are beginning to warn each other now, as people hear the commotion and come to see what it is. Kevan bangs on the door of the glebehouse.

There is no response. He bangs again as loudly as he can.

Timot answers. "Hush. Not now," he says. "We're trying to heal Dolkis."

"Enemies are coming out of the East, soldiers, with weapons," Kevan says. "You all have to get up to the manor, now."

Timot closes his eyes for an instant, then takes a breath through his teeth, reordering his priorities. "Help Gislain carry Dolkis," he says. "Who still needs to be told?"

"Jankin's doing the houses in order down the road," Kevan says. "Can you do the ones from this end? Don't forget Benoit's house." The reeve's large house stands alone off the road at the furthest end of the village. Nine people live in it, but it is Hilden Kevan really cares about. He does not know exactly where Hilden is, because they have made no arrangement to meet today.

Timot nods. "I'm on my way. Go up and bring Dolkis down," he says, coming out past Kevan.

Kevan clatters up the stairs and finds Dolkis asleep, lying on a low bed. Gislain, bending over her, looks up astonished. He

is embarrassingly aware of her nakedness, her dangling breasts and the hair between her legs. He cannot see her without thinking of her and Chayra together and feeling embarrassed. When he calls her ghastly and laughs at her with Hodge, he is building a defence against the thought of her breasts and Chayra's mouth and the question of what it is that women do together. "There's an attack," he says, looking away from her to Dolkis, whose nakedness is anything but attractive. "Soldiers. We have to get her inside the walls before they get here."

"Poor Dolkis can't be moved now," Gislain says, stepping protectively between Kevan and the bed. "It could kill her."

"People with swords could kill her twice as fast," Kevan says. His yeya, never reliable, sweeps over him, tingeing the moment with significance, gilding its edges. He feels he has stood here, done this, a thousand times. He knows bone deep that there is no time to waste, and with that knows how to sway Gislain. "Timot has gone on to carry warnings. He says I'm to help you carry her."

Gislain frowns and reluctantly steps out of the way.

They look down at Dolkis. She is heavy, big boned and awkward. Kevan does not yet have his man's strength and Gislain is not accustomed to carrying weight. Kevan bends and takes Dolkis under the arms and they stagger down the stairs.

"This won't work," Gislain says, stopping by the front door. "We need to find something that would do for a stretcher."

"There isn't time," Kevan says, his feet dancing with impatience.

Gislain leads the way out into the street, which seems very long now. Every awkward moment seems to take an hour. Running villagers pass them, Timot among them. Kevan catches sight of Marjorane passing through the manor gates and knows that the reeve's house has been warned. Then Wylkin the miller overtakes them and swings Dolkis over his shoulder in a straight lift. She wails then, a terrible choked sound which makes Gislain shiver and reminds Kevan of a cat he once

found pinned under a fallen tree, only barely alive. With that wail Kevan hears the yeyan echo of other dashes up this street, staggering under Dolkis's weight, the miller already far ahead, coming to the gates just in time, or once too late and being cut down. The sword that in some other moment kills some other Kevan is coming close. He runs beside Wylkin and Gislain. He could run faster, he is younger and has better wind, but he is afraid of seeming a coward if he outdistances them. Once unburdened, Gislain runs well with a loping stride, her breasts bouncing with her steps. Kevan looks at Wylkin, who staggers along, his breath wheezing through his teeth. He is used to hefting sacks of grain and flour, not running with them.

The soldiers come into sight as the three of them draw near the gates. They have helmets on their heads and weapons in their hands. Most of them have spears, but some have long straight Eastern broadswords. When they see Kevan, Gislain, and Wylkin, the last three stragglers, they come forward in a rush.

A bow sings from the top of the gatehouse and a soldier falls. The big iron gates are closing. Gislain slips through, then Wylkin, and Kevan last, three breaths ahead of the falling sword which is bound to this moment and to his life. He looks back through the latticework of the gate as the soldiers slam into it and meets the eyes of the soldier wielding the sword. They are ordinary eyes, as the moment loses its significance and his yeya with it. The soldier is nothing but an ordinary woman. Even the weapon is just an ordinary sword like the ones he practices with.

Wylkin stops. "Should I take her up to the house?" he asks.

"I suppose so," Kevan replies. The rest of the villagers are clustered in a huddle just inside the walls. Hilden pushes through the crowd and embraces him.

"You're safe! I was so worried!" Kevan hugs back and the villagers around them smile at young love so openly acknowledged at last. Hilden holds on to Kevan's hand. Other hands are held around them, so it does not seem unusual.

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Chayra is up on the gatehouse with Ranal, Perry, and Hanethe beside her. Jankin drags himself up the stairs to stand with them. Chayra gives him a grateful look although he has no weapon. She and Ranal have swords, Perry has a bow, and Hanethe is empty handed, though since he has seen her standing in fire defying a goddess, unarmed is not a word that seems to fit.

"Who comes in arms to Applekirk?" Chayra calls. Her voice, pitched loud enough to carry, comes out thin and reedy. From up there it is possible to see and count the soldiers. Hanethe makes it seventy-six—three of them people of note, she guesses from their clothes. Two have coloured auras around them that mark them as skilled with yeya. She thinks of the other gate-closures she has lived through and tries to console herself that survival this far must be significant. She knows they are there to pin her down, to stop her moving west. Jankin reckons the number at approximately eighty, as he leans against the wall trying to catch his breath. Gislain comes up the steps after a moment—Ranal hands her a bow and a quiver that was leaning against the wall and she sets an arrow to the string without looking down at what her hands are doing.

"Who speaks?" one of the soldiers asks, stepping forward. He is a stocky middle-aged man with a red plume on his helmet and a sword in his hand. His deep voice booms.

"Chayra, daughter of Thobey, wife of Ferrand, lord of Applekirk," Chayra replies. She tries to speak evenly, but by raising her voice she makes it shrill.

"There are no lords of Applekirk," Red Plume says. "Applekirk belongs to the Pedmarks and always has since the Marisians left." Jankin, leaning on the parapet, gives a convulsive start. "You are usurpers, peasants, of ignoble birth. Begone. Yield this land to us and we will let you live."

The villagers murmur. Chayra looks at Ranal, who shrugs. She turns to Hanethe, who is frowning. Hanethe remembers something about the Pedmarks, something her grandmother told her long ago. She speaks quietly. "I think that the Pedmark family all went east long ago, and the last one, an heiress, married an Applekirk and became an ancestor. Ferrand might know."

"But this is ancient history," Chayra whispers.

Hanethe shrugs.

"Not in the East, perhaps?" Ranal mutters.

Jankin tries to calculate time and distances. It isn't easy. If they had held the land after the Marisians left, that must be five or six hundred years ago here. He thinks of the underwater well. If they held it for several generations and left say four hundred years ago here, and went far east, it might only be a hundred years to them, two or three generations.

"You must wait and speak to my husband Ferrand," Chayra says loudly. "What is your name?"

"Galtis Pedmark," Red Plume says. "Where is your husband?"

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Ferrand is in his study raising the yeyan defences of Applekirk. In the house, the line of stones that lies along each windowsill snaps up, making the windows walls of solid stone except for the arrowslits. The kitchen, where Taveth sits bouncing Tydsey on her lap, becomes very dark. Bodkin, the thin cat, misses his patch of sun and wakes, mews, washes his ear furiously for a moment, and settles himself to sleep again.

Three lines of fire run along the outer walls, the first white, the second green, and the third blue. The first will give warning if the walls are in danger. The second will strengthen the physical form of the walls, making them all but unbreachable. The third strengthens their defence against yeyan attack. When

they see the lines of fire, Chayra and Ranal relax a little. Jankin looks at them curiously. Hanethe pays no attention.

"My husband will be here soon," Chayra calls. Then she puts her hand on the parapet. "Ferrand, there are eighty soldiers here who claim the manor in the name of Pedmark," she says clearly.

"This is a ploy of Agdisdis's, to hold me here," Hanethe adds.

The doors of the house repeat this, creakily, so Taveth, Hodge, Melly and Ferrand all hear this news. Melly sketches a shape on the air and draws in her breath. Hodge asks to see, but she brushes him away. Just then Wilkyn reaches the house with Dolkis.

"Your boy Kev and the young ambule were carrying her up the street," Wilkyn says. "I thought it best to bring her here."

"Of course," Taveth says, shifting Tydsey to one hip, then thinking better of it and putting her down next to Melly. "Mind Tyd for me a moment, would you?" Melly puts her arms around Tydsey and buries her face in the baby's shoulder.

"Is everyone safely inside?" Hodge asks Wilkyn.

"I didn't stop to count heads, but we were the last coming up the street," Wilkyn says. "Kevan was the last inside—that's a brave boy you have there. The soldiers were at our heels, swords in their hands, but we outran them."

Taveth feels a little faint at this.

"I wish I knew what they wanted!" Hodge bursts out.

"That'll be for the lord to sort out," Wilkyn says. "I just wish, with whatever wishing yeya I have, that my mill will stay safe to grind that barley, or we'll all be hungry come this winter."

"Could you bring Dolkis upstairs?" Taveth asks.

Wilkyn and Hodge both follow her up the stairs. He sets Dolkis down on the bed in the sewing room where Perry has been sleeping. Perry will have to share Melly's room, Taveth thinks. Or Kevan could go in with Hodge and Jankin could move to Kevan's room so Perry could have her own room again.

Dolkis looks smaller, lying on the bed. She is deeply unconscious, which Taveth thinks is probably a good thing. She is burned in stripes where the fire came up between the thick planks of the platform. After consideration, Taveth does not cover her, but crushes some lavender and lemon balm in the air of the room to promote healing. She leaves Hodge to sit with her and goes back to the kitchen. She will make barley water, she thinks. Dolkis will need it when she wakes and it will do all of them good.

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In his study, Ferrand looks up the Pedmarks and familiarises himself with the facts as the family have them. Then he breaks a message stick to call upon Lord Engleram for aid. There is no immediate answer, but Lord Engleram is his goodlord—Ferrand is his responsibility just as the people of Applekirk are Ferrand's. He has his goodlord's good will, as far as he knows. Lord Engleram is west of them in Engleram itself, and unlikely to be greatly swayed by Agdisdis. Ferrand has paid his tithes regularly and did guest his goodlord at the time of his wedding. He has never asked for help before, but feels confident that it will be forthcoming now.

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Outside the gate the soldiers settle down to wait, looking at the gates and the gatehouse now and then, while those inside watch them. The villagers sit down on the grass in the shade of the wall and begin to speculate about events, even as those on top of the gate hardly dare to. Galtis Pedmark sends off a small group of spearmen down the road towards the village.

In the kitchen Taveth remembers hospitality. "Will you have some ale, Wilkyn?" she asks. "You must be thirsty after carrying her all this way."

"Water will quench this thirst better than ale, thank you kindly," the miller says. Taveth hands him one of her jugs of water and watches him drain it in one great swallow. "Well, I'd better get back to the gates and see if I can be of use," he says, handing it back with a smile.

"I don't suppose Dolkis will thank you for saving her life even when she is able to, but I thank you," Taveth says.

Just then Ferrand comes into the kitchen. Tydsey and Melly are peeping at each other around the corner of the table. Taveth looks up as he comes in.

"No news beyond what Chayra had the doors report," he says. "I have raised the yeyan defences and called on Lord Engleram."

Taveth sets down the heavy jug and comes forward to hug him. "Is everyone safe?" she asks.

"I will have to go and see," he says.

"I think the whole village made it inside," Wilkyn says.

"That's very good news," Ferrand says. "Let's go back together and see what can be done now." He turns back to Taveth when he reaches the doorway.

"We'll need food for everyone," he says.

"For how long?" Taveth asks.

Ferrand grimaces. "Let's worry about today first," he says.

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At the gate, the villagers are confused.

"How can Ferrand not be our lord? How can the Applekirk people be baseborn?" Matattha asks. "It's nonsense. Anyone can see they've been lords since grandfather time."

Grandfather time, Kevan thinks, though heads are nodding all around him, grandfather time is not all that long ago. Hanethe is Ferrand's great-grandmother and she was born a lord. Yet the Pedmarks could still be speaking the truth. There are kinds of time other than grandfather time. Kevan and

Hilden exchange uneasy looks. They know that to the stars, their own lifetimes are no more than an eyeblink, even though to them it is all the time there is.

"But who are these people?" old Gran Jehan asks. "Where have they come from? Why are they making these claims?"

"Dolkis told us Ferrand was evil to shelter Hanethe," Haward says. Haward is three years older than Kevan and has always been a bully. He helps his father farm and gets into trouble—twice brought before the Hallmote for causing disruptions. He was one of those holding a torch when Dolkis led the village against the manor.

"Dolkis has been struck down and Hanethe vindicated by the fire," Timot says, though he looks uneasy. Nobody is quite sure what to make of what happened at the ordeal, though certainly Hanethe was standing at the end and Dolkis was not. Nobody had expected the goddess to intervene so personally.

"Ferrand is our goodlord," Benoit says, his voice quavering a little. "And look, here he comes."

Ferrand and Wilkyn come down the path from the house. Kevan looks at Ferrand anxiously. He wonders if Ferrand realizes that everything he says is being heard by the village as well as by the soldiers. He wishes he could speak to him for a moment, but Ferrand is anything but inviting. Wilkyn joins the villagers and Ferrand takes the steps up to the top of the gatehouse.

On the top, Chayra is holding one of Jankin's hands and one of Ranal's. She looks very pleased to see him, lets go of them and kisses him. Hanethe's face is composed in a sneer, which is not unusual. Gislain and Perry have their bows drawn and are looking out at the soldiers. Ferrand looks down at them and sighs.

"I am Ferrand, lord of Applekirk," he says, coming forward to the parapet where he can be seen from below.

Red Plume Galtis stands up from where he has been sitting and squints up at Ferrand. The fallen soldier has been dragged out of sight.

"Ah, so you are the usurper who sends your wife out to speak for you," he says conversationally.

Ferrand laughs, which sounds quite natural and unforced to everyone who does not know him well. Jankin marvels again at how Ferrand excels at this kind of thing. Galtis looks a little disconcerted.

"I am Ferrand, lord of Applekirk," he repeats. "If I am a usurper it is news to me. Who are you and where have you come from?"

"I am Galtis Pedmark and I came from here, or rather my grandfather did," Galtis says.

"So your grandfather would be Oberey Pedmark, brother of Olfreth Pedmark?"

"My grandfather was Oberey Pedmark, son of Tydrick Pedmark," Galtis says, as if sensing a trap.

"Just so, just so," Ferrand says. "Olfreth and Oberey were twins, and though she was a girl, Olfreth was the older. They inherited Applekirk in common, and Olfreth married Gethen of Applekirk who paid Oberey nine hundred gold mangels for his share and became lord of the manor in his wife's name. Oberey took his wealth and went East, some four hundred and fifty years ago as we count time here. I had wondered what became of him."

"After your peasant ancestors dispossessed him he went east and gathered adherents until we could come back and claim our own," Galtis says. "Leave the manor to me and take up your farm again and we shall say no more about it."

"If Oberey was your grandfather this might seem a living cause to you," Ferrand says. "It is four hundred and fifty years since Gethen married Olfreth and became lord of Applekirk. I am descended from them both. This is simple to prove, as simple as proving that Oberey was your grandfather. I doubt either one of us questions these facts."

Later, Jankin questions Ferrand about how easily he accepts that Galtis is who he says he is. "You should have forced a yeyan test on him," he says. "He could be any wanderer from anywhere."

"Mitra, Jankin, it has been four hundred years!" Ferrand says. "I am the son of sons of lords of Applekirk for all that time, but in four hundred and fifty years, think how many chances there might have been to put a cuckoo in the nest! I would not want to risk such a test, have him say that the times the lordship passed through a woman do not count, nor any such thing. Much better to take him for granted and have him so take me."

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In front of the gate, Galtis nods, "It is simple to prove."

"The dispute between us lies in how your grandfather Oberey left," Ferrand goes on. "I have documents proving that he sold his share and went freely."

"I have soldiers saying he did not!" Galtis retorts.

"Soldiers paid for by the Nemet? By Agdisdis?" Hanethe asks. Ferrand frowns at her, but Galtis looks wrong-footed for the first time. Nobody doubts that this is true. Indeed, Galtis has talked for years in the taverns of Versen about wanting his inheritance, as his father did before him, but he has never had the money to hire soldiers to come raiding before.

"It doesn't matter who paid for them, they do what I say," Galtis says, his red plume tossing as he throws back his head. "Will you leave the manor?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"People of Applekirk," Galtis calls. Kevan, among the villagers, feels them stiffen. "I have no quarrel with you. You are my people and you work my land. Come out and join me, and you can go about your business freely."

"He guesses wrong if he thinks Ferrand is unpopular," Gislain whispers to Jankin. "There are villages I have visited

whose farmers would go streaming out to take up weapons against their lord if they heard that, but not here."

Haward stirs and looks around him. "He did take in Hanethe," he says.

"Plough Hanethe back into the furrow, it's our lord Ferrand this man's attacking!" Wilkyn says, swatting Haward with the back of one hand. Wilkyn spoke against Hanethe at the mote and carries a torch for Dolkis, but he does not suffer fools. The villagers mutter a little, but the gates stay closed. Even those who do not like Ferrand are frightened by the soldiers.

Timot comes forward and stands at the gate. "I am Timot, stable priest of Liakan," he calls. "I ask you Galtis, to sit down with me and Ferrand and with our ambule priest of Diktin, to see if there is a peaceful settlement to this dispute."

"How can there be a peaceful settlement, Father?" Galtis asks. "He has usurped the land of my fathers and refuses to give it up. There's no room for compromise."

"Will you see his documents?" Timot asks.

"Paper can say anything!" Galtis says.

"I will sit down with you if he will agree, but I think that it's hard to see where compromise might lie," Ferrand says.

"Besides, he has killed a man of mine already. The first blood has been shed by Applekirk."

Ferrand, who knows nothing of this, looks at Chayra.

Perry takes a step forward. "I shot one of his soldiers who was about to cut down Kevan," she says, too quietly for the Pedmarks to hear. "I didn't even think. But I'm not sorry—I'd do it again."

"Shot one? Where?" Ferrand asks. He means that the soldiers are wearing armour.

"Straight through the throat," Chayra says, and shrugs at Ferrand's surprise.

"I carried a bow in Belvede's militia all the time I was away—it was my city service," Perry says, looking out over the gathered soldiers. "I never shot at anyone before, but we shot

at targets every other morning and often went out hunting. I came second in archery at the Spring Fair and third at the big Harvest Fair. I hit what I aim at."

"A woman of Applekirk shot your man in defence of her brother," Ferrand calls to Galtis. "Your soldiers were attacking the villagers as they ran for the gates."

"Your villagers were running. People with nothing to hide don't run." Galtis draws his sword. "I have a suggestion. You have a family and a village inside those walls. I have no desire to harm them. Come out and fight with me in single combat, winner keeps Applekirk."

Chayra throws her arms around Ferrand. "No!" she shouts. This is echoed by several of the villagers.

"Do I look suicidal?" Ferrand murmurs, detaching Chayra and stepping forward.

"So far we have slain one of your warriors and you have not hurt us at all. Inside these strong walls, it does not seem to me that my family and villagers are in much danger as yet. If this should change, I shall reconsider your proposal."

Ferrand steps back and draws Gislain and Jankin back with him.

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After the initial excitement, the first day of siege settles down to boredom. Galtis eventually agrees to Timot's offer of sitting down with Ferrand. The villagers make a camp around the gates. Ranal organizes them to bring down wood from the manor's supplies, from which they make fires. Some of them want to construct shelters, but Ranal says they must ask Ferrand.

Ferrand is busy setting a watch. He asks the villagers which of them can use weapons, and shares out the weapons from the rack. Jankin is given a foil again. He looks at it uncomfortably, then sticks it through his belt. Kevan, to his disgust, is not allowed a weapon. The villagers admire his organizing the rescue of Dolkis and the fact that he is last through the gate, but Ferrand still sees him as a child and is determined that children will not fight. Some of the villagers make themselves wooden clubs. Ferrand is about to agree they can make shelters when Hanethe interrupts him, pointing to the shreds of blue and purple meltemi clouds that streak the eastern sky. "If they sleep outside they will sleep unprotected and wake in uncertain temper."

"Everyone will sleep in the manor," Ferrand says, in a tone that will accept no argument.

Taveth, who has come down to the gate with a huge pot of fragrant rice and beans, looks at him in horror. She cannot think where eight hundred people will sleep. The dining room will hold perhaps two hundred and fifty, packed tightly, and the justice room about the same. That is more than half of them—if

she fills the sewing room, the kitchen, Ferrand's study, and every bedroom, she is not sure how she can squeeze the rest in. The whole family can sleep in one room, she thinks, with a pang at the thought of Tydsey. But Tydsey is far from the only baby.

Kevan takes the pot from her and sets it down on the grass. The villagers scoop the food out with their hands. Taveth watches them, mentally assigning them sleeping spaces. Some will have to be on guard, she thinks, relieved. And how long will the food last? How long a siege might they expect?

Ferrand comes back to the gate with his document case. It holds the marriage document of Olfreth Pedmark and the deed of sale of Oberey Pedmark's share of the manor. He wonders idly how his ancestor came to have enough gold to buy him out—nine hundred mangels is more than he sees from the estate in a decade. There is a lost story there, he thinks, of luck, gambling, or treasure hunting.

Chayra is waiting for him inside the archway and she puts her hand on his arm. "About Jankin," she says.

"Not now!" Ferrand is impatient to go out and talk to Galtis. "That doesn't matter. It's all right."

"But I wanted you to know." She bites her lip.

He softens a little. "I know. Don't worry. You should have said something before—Taveth is upset, but it really isn't important at the moment. We're being attacked and your love life will have to keep."

Chayra's face closes up and becomes expressionless. "So while you are out we can rely on the yeyan defences to warn us if the wall is attacked anywhere and keep all our forces at the gates?" she says.

"Keep at least two people on top of the gate watching all the time," Ferrand says. "Better yet, stay there yourself until I come back."

He finds Timot and goes out of the gate to negotiate.

Chayra takes hold of Jankin and takes him with her to the top of the gate. "I have told Ferrand," she says, making her eyes very wide. "Now we can be openly together."

Jankin too is impatient that she has taken the time for this. They are alone. Below, outside the gates, Galtis is sitting on the grass with Timot, Ferrand, and Gislain. Some of the soldiers are pitching tents of streaked red leather. Others are digging a ditch across the road. "Good," Jankin says absently, watching Galtis. He puts his arm around Chayra.

"Ferrand didn't want to listen to me," she tells him. "He said it wasn't important."

"Well, the manor is under attack," Jankin says.

"It isn't in immediate crisis," Chayra protests. "The gates are shut, the yeyan defences up. It looks like they are settling in for a siege." One of the soldiers outside points up to them as she speaks, and she steps back a little from the parapet. "I felt as if I wasn't important to Ferrand. I'm his wife because he needs a wife, and even more than a wife, an heir. I've given him an heir, but it's Taveth he really cares about. He always puts her first, though she's only a sweetmate. He said she was upset as if that were all that mattered."

"She is upset," Jankin says. "I didn't want to upset her even to kiss someone as beautiful as you. We should have spoken to her about it. I do like her."

"You like me better?" Chayra asks.

"Of course," Jankin says, bowing, kissing her hand, but feeling trapped.

"Taveth thinks she's being very magnanimous, very gracious, to share Ferrand and Ranal with me, and it only works for her because she comes first with both of them. I always have to have somebody outside to balance that...to try to balance it. She can't share you with me because you like me better, you put me first, you couldn't resist me."

Jankin wonders whether Chayra feeling this way is one of the ways in which Agdisdis is attacking the weak points in

Ferrand's marriage. He can't quite find a way of putting this into words that doesn't sound unfriendly. She misreads his hesitation.

"You think I'm wrong, that I'd come first with more people because I'm younger and prettier? So would I, but honestly it isn't the case."

Jankin has not previously thought of Chayra as particularly young. She is older than he is, though younger than the other adults in her family. He has finally got it straight that she is Hodge's mother and it has always been obvious that she is Tydsey's mother—motherhood for him seems part of maturity. Nor does he find her prettier than Taveth. He finds them both beautiful, as he finds most women. He thinks she is beautiful like a Chayra, while Taveth is beautiful like a Taveth. In the sunlight on top of the gatehouse he can see clearly that lines are beginning to set in around her eyes and mouth. In the village where Jankin was born they call these "wolf lines" and expect wisdom to have grown in with them. They set great store on whether they are smile or frown lines. Jankin has one fine line only, across his forehead, a line caused by his habit of raising his eyebrows in surprise. Chayra's show her habitual expression to be a little petulant, a little unsatisfied.

He realizes the arm he has around her is trembling, she is shaking.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm afraid."

"But when you had to speak to them you did it really well," Jankin says, entirely sincerely. He is impressed by the way she speaks up for Applekirk, sword in hand.

"When there's something to do, I'm not afraid," she says. Although she would hate the comparison, she is like Kevan and Hanethe in this. "I'm not really afraid that they'll attack. If I have to fight I can—I killed a man once, years ago, a bandit. It's waiting I can't bear. Waiting makes me think I'll die with nothing achieved."

Outside the gates, Galtis clenches his fist and Ferrand stands up taking a step backwards. Timot says something.

"I think everyone is afraid of dying and being forgotten," Jankin says awkwardly. On dark nights he has feared this himself, that all the scraps and tatters of his learning will blow away in the wind when he is dead and nobody will ever care.

"I'm afraid I'll never do my great work." Chayra glares out towards the village, not seeing it. "I make plates and bowls and cups for the table and people say, 'oh pots, how nice, we managed without them and we'll manage again when we break these, but thank you.' And I never get to make the thing, the perfect thing, the thing that makes you gasp when you see it. I saw a vase once."

"A vase?" Jankin asks, surprised.

"For putting flowers in, you know?" Chayra looks at him impatiently. She has almost forgotten he is there.

"I know what a vase is, it's hard to imagine one being a great work." He laughs awkwardly. In Marakanda great works must be sculpture or something written. Pottery is not much esteemed, any more than it is in Applekirk. Only in Serian, where the vase Chayra saw comes from, is pottery considered the highest of the arts. As a young girl she feels her lifelode leads there, but she is content, when the time comes, to marry Ferrand and have a workshop and be able to create.

"This one was great—the lines, the colour, the shape. It wasn't ornate—very plain, very simple. Perfect. I've tried to copy it, but I always end up smashing my copies because they're not right. Anyway, it was that artists's great work not mine. I don't know what mine will be, but it won't be a new blue bowl for Taveth's casseroles. I make the useful things people need—I always think I am wasting time I should be using for the real thing."

Ferrand, Timot, and the ambule priest rise up, bow to Galtis, and walk away, back to the gate. Ranal opens it and closes it again swiftly as soon as they are inside.

"You'll have time to work. You'll make it yet, whatever it is," Jankin says, as comfortingly as he can.

"Oh, Jankin." She reaches out to take his hand. "You try to understand. You're so kind. I don't want to die unloved with my work undone. I sometimes think of myself like a lonely lovadile with its tears and open mouth."

Before Jankin can reply to this frankly horrific image, Perry joins them on top of the gatehouse. He moves away from Chayra, but not before Perry sees that he has been embracing her. She raises an eyebrow and looks very like Ranal. Her skin, Jankin notices, is as smooth and clear as dark summersweet, entirely unmarked as yet by her passing moods. Her looping curls of hair, carelessly caught up on top of her head, are beginning to fall down. She is beautiful like a Perry, which is very beautiful indeed. She is also carelessly and effortlessly young.

"Ferrand sent me up. Everyone with bows is coming up," she says. "There aren't that many of us who are good with one."

"You're the best here by a long way," Chayra says.

"Ranal says you should go down. He wants to discuss strategy," Perry says, taking a position at the parapet.

Chayra looks at Jankin dramatically, then clatters down the stairs.

"Are you going to shoot them?" Jankin asks Perry.

"When Ferrand says I should," Perry replies, looking quietly composed. "Oh, and please don't make up to me. Nothing against you, but I don't go for that sort of thing at all. Men, women, I have no use for any of it."

Jankin draws himself up. "I know I've made a fool of myself with your mother and Chayra, but I hope I havn't been behaving badly enough that you think I can't be alone with a pretty young girl for five minutes on top of a tower in the middle of a siege without putting myself in her way?"

Perry laughs. "Sorry, Jankin," she says. "It's the endless flirtation that gives that impression. Even now you can't say a girl, you have to say a pretty girl."

"Well it would be easier with an ugly girl," Jankin admits.

"You just can't stop, can you?" she says.

Jankin had hoped to make her laugh, but Perry sounds a little annoyed. He grits his teeth. "The trouble with this place is that nobody understands how to flirt. You all take it so incredibly seriously all the time."

Perry does laugh at that, then looks at him sharply. "Do you mean that?" she asks. "Yes, I see you do. Poor Jankin, I understand you a bit better now. You flirt as you breathe. You think it's just being polite. I expect that's what got you into trouble with Mother and probably with Chayra as well. People here aren't used to that."

Gislain comes up the stairs followed by half a dozen villagers with bows. One of them is Hilden, who Jankin has seen hand-in-hand with Kevan. Ferrand comes up last. "Can you shoot, Jankin?" Ferrand asks.

Jankin stares at him for a moment. "No, I can't shoot," he says. "I still have my thumbs, see?"

Ferrand looks puzzled. He has no idea that in the Westmarch poachers have their thumbs cut off and any villager owning a bow or even admitting to knowing how to use one is assumed to be a poacher. Here, stolen deer would burn the mouth of any commoner who poached one. "Well, if you can't shoot, go down to Ranal at the gate," he says.

Jankin goes down. The casual question about shooting has disconcerted him even more than talking to Perry.

"This is war," Ferrand says, briefly. "I want to drive them back. We can't waste arrows, and they're mailed, so they're hard targets unless you're as good as Perry, the second best archer in all Belvede. Aim for their throats and hands and drive them back to the edge of bowshot. If you're not a marksman, aim for tents that have people inside. They may have their armour off there."

They nod and draw their bows. Perry shoots first, dropping one man silently. Then Galtis gives a command and the soldiers

fling themselves flat, making them impossible targets. They fire into the tents, but it is hard to know if this has any effect.

"Shoot if they get up," Ferrand says. "We want to get them away from the walls, and we want to discourage them."

After some time in which the archers shoot occasionally and the soldiers raise shields whenever they move, Hanethe comes up to the top of the gate. She looks out, assessing the situation.

"They look as if they're getting ready to rush the gate. I could blast them," she says.

"Don't start with yeya," Ferrand says. "I couldn't get Galtis to agree to any terms of engagement, but Lord Engleram is coming and I want to be in the right on this. Wait until they use yeya on us."

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It is not a long wait.

The soldiers get up behind shields, all seventy-two of them, fully armed and armoured. The archers let loose a flight of arrows and one soldier falls, but the others keep their shields high. They are clearly preparing to charge the gates. Ferrand calls down to those below, but they have seen through the iron bars of the closed gate and are prepared to resist.

They are not prepared for what comes at them, which is a directed blast of yeyan force. It blows the gates off their hinges, they fall flat on the ground. The defenders are pushed back in the gateway. Jankin stands as firmly as he can between Chayra and Wilkyn the miller. Wilkyn holds a ferocious knobbed club in both hands—Jankin finds this extremely reassuring.

The house doors give a great howl in sympathy with the breached gate, and tremble in their doorways. Melly leaps to her feet, but Tydsey wails at the sound of the doors, so Melly cannot leave her to see what is happening at the gate. She draws the pattern of it in the air furiously.

Galtis's soldiers run for the gap and for a moment there is fierce fighting there, with swords and clubs. Jankin fences as he has been taught and is surprised how much like practice it is. Then the soldier he is fighting slashes at his legs—a forbidden move in practice, and he is so affronted he responds with a thrust to the throat, killing the man in a fountain of blood. Beside him, Wylkin has clubbed another soldier, who has fallen heavily and in doing so has sliced through Wilkyn's belly. Wilkyn falls forward on top of his dead foe, guts tangling around Jankin's feet as he parries a blow from a third soldier.

Then Hanethe reaches the bottom of the steps where she can see the gateway and the fallen gate. With a hand gesture she raises the fallen metal of the gate, spilling those who were standing on it, including Jankin's opponent. The gate lifts up and settles itself back in place, trapping three of Galtis's soldiers inside. With a twist of her hand she seals the gate to the gateway. Chayra kills the soldier who is engaged with her, and the last two fall on their knees to surrender. Jankin is shaking. He puts his hand to the bars of the gate for support and finds to his surprise that the latticework is metal no longer, but stone like the rest of the wall. Jankin strokes it carefully. The stone has all the welds and cast-marks it had when it was iron, but feels like the rest of the wall. The texture is entirely different from carved stone.

"I hope you can undo that again," Ferrand murmurs to Hanethe. He has come down the stair behind her.

She turns to look at him, surprised. "No," she says. "Or not unless you want the whole wall to be iron, and even then I don't know if I could do it. We'll need a new gate when they go away."

"It's a small price," Ferrand says. "Thank you."

"Now can I blast them?"

Ferrand hesitates. "Can you kill them all?" he asks.

"I don't know. Probably I can find a way. It won't be by blasting them one at a time—there are too many of them and

they could run out of range before I got them all. I could make the ground crack and bury them, though that might hurt our walls." She swallows. "I could send a plague, though it wouldn't be instant, and it wouldn't limit itself to them."

"Set their tents on fire," Ferrand says. "Then blast a few of them, but no farther away than bowshot."

"I can't do it even that far. They need to be quite close."

Ferrand nods. "Do the ones that are close. If you can catch whoever was doing their yeya and Galtis himself that would probably be as good as killing all of them."

Hanethe climbs back up the gatehouse stairs, clutching the rail, her palms wet. Memories of the plague run through her mind. She has never imagined she would offer to start one. She has never hated anyone that much. It is Agdisdis she hates, not these Pedmarks. She wants to see Agdisdis ravaged by plague, most of her bodies fallen and those remaining weak, making forced choices by necessity. She is glad Ferrand did not accept, but she knows she would do it if he had. She is shaking when she reaches the top of the gate. Blasting the nearby soldiers is a balm and a relief to her, as good as taking a knife to her flesh. She sees the looks of fear and uncertainty that Perry and the other archers give her and dismisses them. That isn't her worry any more. Applekirk needs her now, whether it wants her or not.

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Old Timot comes up to look at Dolkis. "I have been outside the gate trying to arrange to avoid bloodshed, but to no avail," he says to Taveth, shaking his head. He examines Dolkis. "I can't do anything for her without Gislain, and Gislain has gone up to the gatehouse with the archers. We'll come to see her later."

"Later," Taveth agrees, distracted. She has more worries than a burned priest. Dolkis stirs a little and Timot gives her a few mouthfuls of barley water.

"If I had my autumn supplies in," Taveth says, "I could have fed the whole village for weeks."

Although they have seen the skazlorls and the barley harvest has been gathered, Taveth has not yet begun the Autumn preserving of the fruit and meat to see them through the winter. She looks through the supplies she has and uses all her beans and rice to make one big meal. Then she sets up firepits and starts to roast two cows. She bakes bread, six big loaves at a time—all her oven will hold—calculates how many that will feed and winces. Flatbreads take less room and cook faster, but even with flatbreads, all she has cannot feed the whole village for more than four days. She looks at the vegetable garden and calculates, shaking her head.

Back in the kitchen she gives in to Melly's pleadings and sets Hodge to watch Tydsey, but she will not let Melly run off to Hanethe. "You've had enough of Tydsey. I can understand that, but I need you to help. You can watch Dolkis." Melly settles resentfully in the sewing room.

"You won't hurt her?" Taveth asks, suddenly uncertain of Melly's allegiances.

"I helped drag her out of the fire, I wouldn't hurt her now," Melly says dismissively, sounding like Hanethe. "I'll give her more barley water if she wakes."

Hodge, relieved to be out of the sewing room, would also like to go to the gate to see what is happening. "I'll be lord of the manor one day. I should see how Father deals with this," he says persuasively.

"Watch Tydsey now, there may be a chance later," Taveth says. She does not want any of the children at the gate. She would bring even Kevan and Perry back if she could. Hodge takes Tydsey into the garden and gives her a ride on his shoulders.

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Taveth is glad not to have Tidsey on her hip when she goes off to find Ferrand. He is with Chayra near the gate, talking to the two soldiers who surrendered. More mouths, Taveth thinks, horrified. He sees her and leaves the soldiers crouching against the wall. Their eyes follow him—they look afraid. Chayra says something to them which makes them cringe and then comes to join Taveth.

"They're hired warriors from Versen," Ferrand tells Taveth wearily. "They'll give parole not to fight against us, but how are they going to get home?"

"They should pay ransoms," Chayra says fiercely, but as if she has said it before. "When my father went to war any captured soldiers paid ransoms for their release."

"They should, yes, but I'm not going to insist on it because it isn't practical at this distance," Ferrand says. "No wars are practical at this distance. Damn Agdisdis anyway."

"I need to know how long this is going to last," Taveth says.

Ferrand shrugs. "I've sent to Lord Engleram. He'll be able to end it when he comes. The soldiers won't fight if Galtis

Pedmark's cause is proclaimed unjust, and there's a good chance that Lord Engleram will take him back to Engleram."

"How long though?" Taveth repeats. "I don't have enough food to keep feeding eight hundred people for very long."

She sees the shadow of a fifteen-year-old Ferrand entirely out of his depth as she speaks. The thought of supplies has not crossed his mind, with everything else he has been trying to organize. "From Engleram," he says, calculating, remembering. "I'd say four or five days at the least, and that's if he sets out at once. We shouldn't count on less than ten."

"If there are eight hundred of us we outnumber them ten to one," Chayra says. "We should attack and get rid of them, not suffer a siege at all."

"Ten times as many mouths, not ten times as many swords," Ferrand points out. "Of our eight hundred, almost three hundred are children, too young to fight. Sixty or so are old people. Of the rest, those the right age, perhaps half are strong enough to fight and do damage, the rest are weak or lame or pregnant. That gives us a fighting strength of two hundred and twenty or so, untrained, only half of them armed and none of them armoured at all, against eighty skilled soldiers. When they broke in, we killed four of them and took two prisoner, and they killed sixteen of ours. They're trained fighters and they have good weapons and heavy mail. If we rush them, it would be a massacre—even if everyone who can carry a club would agree to try it—by no means certain since they're not fools. Even if we could win, such a victory would be worthless at that cost."

Chayra frowns. "So what do we do?"

"I have divided the ones capable of fighting into two watches of a little over a hundred each. Maybe it should be four watches of fifty, but this will do for now. We can hold out until Lord Engleram comes." Ferrand turns to Taveth. "Kevan really wants to fight. Do you think he's old enough? Ranal seems to think he would be of use."

Taveth feels a pang but pushes down her feelings and nods. "If Ranal thinks so I won't stop him. Kevan is not a child."

"He's half-way between, it's a terrible age," Chayra says.

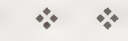
"What I came to say is that I estimated enough food for four days," Taveth says. "If I give everyone half of that, which would be enough to survive, it would only last for eight days. We might need more than that."

"Perhaps Hanethe can help," Ferrand says. "Bring some supplies here from houses in the village or from the mill perhaps."

"Where is she?" Taveth asks.

"She's on top of the gatehouse with Perry and the archers, trying to keep the enemy at a distance."

"I'll speak to her," Taveth says. Ferrand goes back to the prisoners. Chayra walks off towards the gate where a group of men including Ranal and Jankin are digging a grave for the fallen.



When Taveth sees Hanethe on top of the gate she is more herself and less Agdisdis than Taveth has ever seen her. She is almost swallowed in her spiky fifteen-year-old shadow. Her present self looks old and tired.

"We're keeping them off, Mother," Perry says. "They aren't coming close. Some of them have been going around as if they're maybe thinking about trying the wall somewhere else. I sent Hilden down to tell Ferrand."

"The yeya's too strong," Hanethe says. She has enhanced the yeyan defences of the wall until she is sure it is unbreachable. She sees it in her mind as one snake-shaped stone with its tail in its mouth at the gatehouse where she stands.

"They could go over," Perry says.

Hanethe nods. They could go over. She draws upon the inexhaustible yeya of the world and her reserves of strength. She thinks of the wall and the earth of Applekirk. She pricks her finger with her dagger and touches the blood to a stone at

her feet. It seems to shine out of the rough mortar setting as if it were a diamond. Taveth draws breath but does not speak. Hanethe concentrates, draws down yeya, and all at once the walls are topped with white flame twice their height. She smiles, wearily, and sees respect as well as fear in the eyes of the archers.

"How long will that last?" Taveth asks.

"I can fix it so it will hold, but I need Emelis and the others," she says, knowing as she says it that Taveth is the worst person to ask.

"I'll send her to you," Taveth says, surprising Hanethe. Taveth looks up at the white tongues of cool flame, awed. She can see nothing beyond them. She remembers what she came for. "I need...I will need food. There's food in the village. Ferrand thought maybe you could use yeya to bring it inside."

Hanethe laughs a cracked laugh. She sees the white fire dancing before her eyes and holds it tightly to the stone of the walls. "Nothing can come inside," she says. "Nothing can come through now. We are sealed in."

Taveth sighs and goes down the stairs. Perry follows her. "I don't think I can shoot through that," she says. "What is it? For that matter, what is she?"

"She's a god, I think, or part of a broken god that the other part wants back," Taveth says. "Where she isn't a god, she's someone who used to be lord of Applekirk and didn't want to be, and someone who had something terrible happen to her when she was fifteen. A plague, she said, that killed all her family. But something worse than that too, I think."

"Poor Hanethe," Perry says. "But I'm not sure entrusting the yeyan defences to her was very sensible of Ferrand."

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Taveth asks the villagers gathered around the fires if some of them will come up to the manor to help her. She has more

offers than she needs. She leaves Orbel in charge, telling her to bring all the babies and very small children to the manor where they can be cared for together. She leads the others back to the kitchen, putting them to work. She takes the bread from the ovens and sets it to cool. The heat and the good smell makes her feel centred in herself. Even if six loaves won't go far among eight hundred people, she is at the heart of her lifelode, keeping house.

The smell of the bread gives her the strength she needs to send Melly to help Hanethe. "Try to keep her sane," Taveth says. "And try to make her pace herself. She's pouring out all her strength and she must already have been tired after the fire last night." It seems a thousand years ago already.

"I'll do what I can," Melly says. "I knew she needed me."

"You were right," Taveth says.

"She'll need the others too. I'll find them."

Melly goes running off and as she nears the gate she gathers up the other children Hanethe has been teaching. Hadley and Nan come running as she reaches the fires, but she has to search for Gisil.

"My father," Gisil says, all wide-eyed and tear-streaked cheeks. "He was killed in the attack. I can't leave my mother now."

"You have two sisters to look after your mother," Melly says ruthlessly. "You need to help Hanethe so that they don't get killed too in the next attack."

Gisil follows Melly and the others up the stairs to the top of the gate. Hanethe is alone there now, the other archers having come to the same conclusion as Perry. She is holding the fire with her mind. The children know what to do. Fixing yeya is something she has taught them well. Melly takes the fire, step by step, from Hanethe, holding it steady, so Hanethe can guide them as they fix it to the wall. When Nan would have sealed it so it would last forever, Melly stops her. "We will need to get out when the siege is over," she says. "We should fix it so that all of us together can release it."

"So any of us can," Gisil says, hardly loudly enough for them to hear. "We might not all be here."

"We need a word to release it," Hanethe says.

"Helver," Gisil says. It is the name of her dead father.

"Helver," Hanethe agrees, and with that word they seal the fire to the walls.

Afterward Hanethe needs to be helped down the steps. She sits by the first fire she reaches, shivering. The others at the fire eye her warily, and look from her to the white flames and back. Some of them would like to blame her for all the troubles, but they can all see she is doing all she can to protect them now. Melly brings her water and sends Hadley running for food. He brings fresh bread and summersweet, which Hanethe eats in small bites, carefully. "Taveth says there may not be enough food," she says.

"When we're rested," Melly says, "We can see that the plants put out their fruit."

It is part of the first yeya Hanethe teaches them, because it is good discipline to bring a plant to fruit. They all know it and so does Thad, who falls away from Hanethe's lessons because they are too much work.

"Don't exhaust yourselves," warns Hanethe, exhausted.

Taveth leaves Marjorane in charge in the kitchen, where everything is under control. Orbel has set up a children's area in Tydsey's room. It is full of mothers and babies. Taveth sees that all is well with them, then does her best to organize sleeping arrangements. She brings out every blanket in the house. She assigns rooms to big families. Hodge, once freed of Tydsey, is very helpful. He organizes the village children to run messages down to Ferrand at the gate. Taveth feeds the village in relays and settles them down to sleep inside the house. They are packed very closely together, but they laugh and make the best

of it. Ferrand has arranged a night watch to patrol around the wall, though none of them believe anyone can cross the flames. In the darkness they look like great teeth or perhaps like ice when it is breaking up on the river in spring.

Hanethe says she will stay at the gate. Taveth insists that Melly sleep, and neither she nor Hanethe protests, which worries Taveth. Nan and Gisil stay with Hanethe for the night. Chayra appears for supper hand in hand with Jankin, whose leather suit is spattered with blood and dirt. Taveth sees them, Chayra sporting her seventeen-year-old shadow and Jankin one of a small and penitent child, and wonders at herself that only this morning she could have found the situation so troublesome. She sits down beside Ranal and eats.

It is not until everyone has eaten and most people are asleep side by side somewhere in the manor that Taveth realizes Dolkis is no longer in the sewing room.

21

"Folk never fight like this in the West," Jankin says, marvelling at the unwavering white fire that limns the wall. He says it again, coming back from the gatehouse to the manor. He runs his hand over the new stone windows, seeing the little pebbles and chunks of stone run together like colours in water. It feels rough and nubbly, like raw rock.

"There are ways of fighting, East or West," Ferrand replies. "Taveth has complained that having the windows blocked makes the kitchen hot and stuffy when she is cooking."

Jankin laughs. But he has read chronicles of war, and wonders. He thinks of the Marisians, who like himself were from the Westmarch, and wonders whether it was unfamiliar yeyan fighting that defeated them here. As he draws water from the rough stone well in the courtyard he remembers the ancient Marisian well uncomfortably. One of the few yeyan arts that is common in the Westmarch is divining for water with a forked hazel twig.

He eats his scanty supper of roast beef and flatbread without tasting it, and sleeps curled up in a corner of the dining room—beneath the tapestry Hanethe sews when she is eight years old.

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That first night of siege passes without attack, and the strong yeyana of the manor hold off whatever dreams or moods Agdisdis is sending on the wind. The morning is bright and

warm once the early mist has burned off. Taveth makes porridge over and over, until all the oats are gone. "If we get through this, we still have to get through the winter," she says to Ferrand, who grimaces.

"We can buy what we need if we have to," he says. "It may take all our reserves, it may mean going without ribbons or books, or it may mean selling some jewelry or horses, but we will be able to replace what we need to get through the winter."

That day he drills his four companies of fifty villagers. There are thirty fighters in addition. He calls them the night watch and they sleep in the top rooms of the towers during the day. Hanethe sits by the gate and does not sleep. Nobody wants to ask her what she is doing. Ferrand asks Melly, who says it would be better not to disturb her. There is no sign of Dolkis, though Gislain organizes a search through the grounds.

Taveth sets everyone who complains about the chill of the night to sewing more blankets under Perry's direction, since Perry's archery skills are not needed while the fire prevents seeing the enemy. Taveth organizes a rota for watching the children and for cooking, and even sets three women to finish washing the smocks she abandoned the previous morning when Hodge brought the news of the attack.

The children Hanethe has taught coax all the trees and plants that can produce edible fruit to do so in abundance. Taveth is delighted, then overwhelmed. She sets Orbel and the others to making a great stew with a little lamb and plentiful vegetables, and sends a party to the orchard to pick apples. She looks in on Tydsey's room where twelve mothers are being driven to distraction by thirty-four babies kept awake by Tydsey crowing out words. She leaves them there, puts on her oldest dress, and goes to pick blackberries. She thinks she will make a great compote with blackberries, apples, and wintersweet. She hopes to have enough for all the children.

Melly has done her yeya in the blackberry patch, and it is bearing in great abundance. It is almost time for the blackberries to ripen in any case, and they have responded with enthusiasm to the yeyan encouragement. Taveth quickly fills the first basket she brought and begins on the second. The sun streams down and she wishes for a hat. The thorns of the bramble catch on her skirt as she reaches up. She stops to untangle it. Despite the thick material of her dress, she has cut herself, a jagged row of tiny gashes. The patterns the gashes make in her skin seem almost like runes she could read. She finds it familiar and almost comforting. She does the same thing every year and the children always come back prickeled all over when she sends them blackberrying.

She is half-way through filling the second basket when Jankin comes past. He has a gash in his left hand.

"How did you do that?" she asks.

"They're shooting arrows high over the wall, very high, to get over the fire. They can't see what they're doing, of course, and they have to shoot pretty high to reach in here, so most of the arrows are spent when they come down. I was picking some up to replenish the supplies for Perry and the other archers when one of them hit me—pure bad luck, but fortunately it was one of the almost spent ones and the wound isn't very bad."

"You should get someone to look at it," Taveth says, taking his hand and looking at it herself.

"It's not deep and it's bleeding clean," he says.

She looks at the ragged edges of the cut. The arrow must have scraped down the back of his hand towards his wrist. He was lucky that his hand or wrist didn't get pierced.

"Can you move your fingers?" she asks.

In reply, he smiles wickedly at her and moves them to stroke the back of her hand where she is holding his. She is all at once entirely aware of his body and hers, and wants him. Her legs feel unsteady and her belchose prickles with urgency.

"Taveth…" he begins, his voice low.

She puts her finger to his lips. "Don't say anything at all," she says. Nothing is less arousing than excuses. For the moment she only cares that he wants her now, this moment, in the blackberry patch in the sun, and she wants him too, very much. After all, why not, she says to herself. Chayra obviously doesn't care, why should she be more scrupulous? She had him first—this is not about love, she knows now it never really was—it is much simpler and more primal, as natural as the sunlight or the thorns on the blackberries.

She steps away from him and pulls her dress off over her head in one motion. He is completely surprised, then undoes his breeches and takes hold of her. She pulls him down to the grass and almost at once his plough is inside her and begins to move, and she thinks "oh this, yes, this." He is the sun and the rain, and she feels the grass beneath her and Jankin above her as if she were the centre and the beating heart of the world, turning on a pivot where Taveth and Jankin join.

Afterward when she opens her eyes, she sees Chayra standing above them, blocking the sun, her mouth open in an expression of horror and amazement. Taveth laughs and hugs Jankin, who has collapsed across her chest and has not seen Chayra or anything at all.

"How could you!" Chayra shouts, and storms off towards the house. Taveth laughs again, though she does not mean to. Jankin does not laugh, but neither does he leap up and rush after Chayra.

"This is not a way I've behaved since I was Kevan's age," she says after a moment, half amused and half appalled. She notices there is blood on her breast from his hand.

"I don't expect Chayra will ever speak to me again," Jankin says, tucking his shrivelled plough back into his clothes.

"She'll get over it," Taveth says. Jankin looks abashed, but she still wants to laugh because it all seems so silly. She knows she should get up and go to the kitchen and stew the blackberries. "You don't really care at all about either of us, do you?" she asks.

"I like you a lot," Jankin says. "And I like Chayra too, in a different way."

"You like every woman who makes your plough stand up," Taveth says, smiling at him. She pulls her dress back on and puts out a hand to help him up. His leathers are grass-stained now. She wonders how she will ever get them clean.

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Back at the house Taveth makes compote, singing to herself. Marjorane chops the apples and Taveth stirs them in. Ferrand, passing through the kitchen, rolls his eyes at her. "What?" she asks.

He looks at Marjorane's face, eager for gossip, and draws Taveth out into the vegetable garden. "Chayra's been complaining about you."

"Well, we can both complain about each other like schoolgirls, or we can decide to laugh at the whole situation and share Jankin with each other and anyone else who happens to catch his eye," Taveth says. She moves a little to the side to get the sun out of her eyes.

"I don't have time for this nonsense," Ferrand says.

Taveth hugs him. He stands still, unresisting but not relaxing into her arms either. She looks up at him. "Don't worry about it. I'll be especially nice to Chayra and leave Jankin alone from now on." She doesn't mind the thought at all, now that she no longer feels publicly spurned. "It doesn't mean anything to him, I see that now."

"That's what Perry says, he flirts as he breathes and we shouldn't hold him responsible for how people react to him." Ferrand still looks stern.

"Perry said that?" Taveth is amazed and a little surprised that Ferrand and Perry have been discussing her lover. "She must have changed."

"No, she still says she doesn't have time for any of it. But sometimes someone entirely uninvolved sees most clearly."

Ferrand returns her hug for a moment, then lets her go. She steps away. "I'll talk to Chayra. It'll be all right. Get back to your cooking." He smiles and sits down on the steps in his usual place. "How many days can we last now, with all the extra fruit?"

"Ten days at least," she says, sitting beside him. "I never thought Hanethe would be so useful."

"Jankin says they don't make war like this in the West. I didn't tell him we don't usually make war here at all, and least of all like this. I'm thinking of making him leader of one of the troops. He seems to have experience." The fifteen-year-old shadow she sees by the gatehouse is back, peeping around the present-day Ferrand and hoping for her approval.

"Probably all from books," Taveth says.

"Perhaps, but he knows how to fight. He's one of the ones who actually killed a soldier at the gate. Also, he's presently in Chayra's troop, and this would separate them. I think it's a good idea."

"Will the villagers accept him?" Taveth asks, leaning back against Ferrand and looking out over the walled garden.

Ferrand thinks for a moment before speaking. "I think they will. Most people like him—he's a very likeable person. Also, they saw him fight, and for them he's one of the manor people and therefore to be looked up to. If I set one of their fellows over them then there will be brangling I'll have to settle. Jankin will be easier." He puts an arm around Taveth. It might be any day they sit here discussing the problems of the village and the manor. "The other troops are led by Ranal, Chayra, and Lowis, Benoit having agreed for once that he's too old for something."

Taveth laughs. "Poor Benoit. But yes, I suppose using Jankin makes sense unless you want to lead a troop yourself."

"I don't want them all feeling proud they're in my troop, or feeling disgruntled because they're not." Ferrand sighs. "Besides, I hope and expect we won't actually have to fight. Organising

troops and watches gives people something real to do, which is important in itself. Jankin can certainly use a sword, and maybe he can teach them how to use weapons."

"He's good at teaching, he'd like that," Taveth says.

"Well, that's what Hodge said."

"You really are listening to the children today." Taveth is amused.

"Not Kevan. He's in Ranal's troop, so Ranal can keep an eye on him, but he's been to me twice today with mad ideas for how we can attack them—one of them was by making a balloon and flying over the fire and the other was the slightly more sensible option of digging a tunnel."

Taveth laughs, and Chayra, who is walking up the path with Gislain, catches the two of them sitting laughing together in the sunshine. She sets her face hard against them, turns, and walks back down the path.

"That's not good," Taveth says, moving away from Ferrand guiltily, though he has been her sweetmate for sixteen years.

"Worse than you think," Ferrand says quietly, because Gislain is almost in hearing. "I promised Chayra I would scold you."

"You did scold me," Taveth says in an undertone.

"That's not what she saw, and this is the second time today she's seen something she doesn't want to see." Ferrand sighs.

"You'd better go after her," Taveth says, standing up.

"No, I have too much to do. I'll catch her later." Ferrand goes forward to greet Gislain, who was looking for him to report that she cannot find Dolkis. Taveth goes back to her work in the kitchen, where she must deflect the anxious questions of Marjorane, who is very curious to know what the lord of the manor had to say to Taveth.

22

Melly pesters Taveth into allowing her to share the night watch with Hanethe. Taveth, worn with all she has to do, gives in at last, sending her down with the food. "Come back if you get tired. Don't go too near the walls in case they shoot arrows over. Try to be sensible, Melly, for goodness sake." Melly grabs the food and runs off, bouncing a covered pot of broth along the air behind her. She goes quickly before Taveth can change her mind and Taveth almost forgets her in the press of other things she has to do. Taveth has the whole village to worry about, and Melly will be with Hanethe. Between them, Taveth feels sure, they have yeya enough for whatever might threaten them.

Hanethe is as tired as she has ever been, as tired as she is during the plague harvest. She dares not sleep lest Agdisdis comes for her. She has not slept since the short time the night after the burning. She sits at the fire near the gatehouse and occasionally takes a bite of the bread and summersweet in her hand. Taveth sends it down with Melly at nightfall, and Hanethe is glad of it, the sweetness and the immediacy of taste and texture. There is not much that is more real than fresh-baked bread spread with summersweet, and unlike most of the food Taveth makes, seasoned to Eastmarch tongues, she does not find it overspiced. Melly devours hers in four big bites as she runs down to the gate, delighted to be free to go. Hanethe eats hers slowly, one bite at a time, making it last.

Melly builds up the fire. The flickers of flame sometimes remind Hanethe of the fire of ordeal, but more often it is just

warmth and comfort and human presence. Hadley also stays with Hanethe through the night, tending the fire and the pots they have set on it. Hanethe feels Melly's presence close to hers, warm and protective. Hadley is more distant, he is a small fast-moving minnow darting around her. She has only to speak their names to have Melly and Hadley touch her, leaning their yeya into hers. So if she needs to she can have them do it for her and not exhaust herself more. All the yeya in the world is ready to her hand, but her body is a poor instrument and weary of manipulating it.

She yawns. She feels her yeya like a banked ember. Without reaching for it, without reaching out at all she is aware of the heart of clustered people that is the manor, and of the thirty armed folk of Applekirk patrolling inside the walls. They go to the gate quite often. Now that the walls are topped with white fire the only place they can see the enemy is through the latticework. They come to Hanethe's little fire now and then, where Hadley keeps the pots boiling and can give them cups of vegetable broth or tisanes to warm them in their work. Melly scorns the cooking pots. Those of the nightwatch who come from peering through the gate report that the enemy seems to be moving about quite a bit. Good, Hanethe thinks, let them exhaust themselves for nothing. Let them fling themselves against her yeya and see who is the stronger.

No fireflies show themselves. It is a chill night. There is no frost but the dew falls cold and heavy, so it is unpleasant sitting outside. She is glad of the fire and of the warm cloak Melly brought with her. There is a thick overcast, blotting out the stars and the high sky. The white fire burns without Hanethe's aid or attention, lighting the grass and casting strange shadows. Hanethe does not sleep—dares not sleep—the thought of sleep is far from her, and her awareness spreads out away from her body. She is gathering herself, renewing and restoring herself. The people who come to the fire sometimes want to speak to her, but Hadley and Melly warn them away and she is glad.

At first she thinks Dolkis is one more shadow, dark against darkness. Without her yeyana there is nothing in her to reflect any light. Hanethe does not see her, she feels her presence trying to pass the fire, to go towards the gate.

"Dolkis," she says. The priest freezes where she stands.

She turns to Hanethe and her mouth opens. Hanethe expects her to speak, but only a hiss comes out of her blackened throat.

Hadley twitches a little. His first impulse is to give Dolkis a drink, but he rocks back on his heels when he realizes who it is and why she has come. Melly moves closer to Hanethe and puts her hand on her shoulder, in case Hanethe needs her.

"Get someone who can take her back to the manor," Hanethe says to Hadley, who darts off. She focuses on Dolkis, who even without speech is still a snake that can twist and bite. Dolkis turns and runs lumberingly away from them towards the gate. Hanethe gets up, stiff in every joint, and follows, Melly at her side.

If the gates had still been metal and possible to open, Dolkis might have been able to drag them apart, for Hanethe stumbles as she runs and Melly stops to help her. She has no strength to reach out to stop the priest. It is the stone that defeats Dolkis, the stone gate that cannot be opened by mere human strength. She hisses again at Hanethe as she reaches her, her voice rasping in her throat. She clutches at the scarred and burned spot on her chest where her yeyana had lain before it was removed.

"Agdisdis abandoned you," Hanethe says. "She spoke to me and let the fire burn more fiercely after you had fallen. She doesn't care about you at all except as a tool. You are alive because Melly and I pulled you out of the fire. Why are you still doing her bidding?" Dolkis's eyes and teeth flash in the light of the white fire, but she does not speak or even hiss any more. She tries again to budge the unyielding stone mesh of the gates.

"My yeya has always been greater than yours," Hanethe says. "You have seen that you cannot open this gate. Nor can you make a breach in the walls. They are sealed with a word, and you cannot speak."

Melly laughs, seeing the absurdity of it. Dolkis looks at her and she falls silent. Dolkis stretches out her hand towards Melly, her fingers crooked. It looks like a claw. Unwilling, Melly takes a step towards her.

At that moment, as Hanethe moves to protect Melly, Agdisdis attacks. Hanethe feels she is seeing them all from very far away, through the stone lattice of the gate, two old women bending forward with a child between them. They mean nothing to her, for what is she but the god? She is the strongest part of the god at that, the part that can use the choice given her. She tastes power—is power for a moment—lets the change that is inside her come forward to her tongue.

Melly screams, interrupting her, a shrill wordless screech. If it were anyone else Hanethe would have gone into the goddess and lost herself, but Melly is in her heart. She writhes for a moment, poised between the power and her exhausted body. Her own flesh has always been difficult for Hanethe to love, the body with its pains and obligations. The part of her mind that is all Agdisdis asks, "What are you going back for, to help some grubbers? Make the choice. Only the grubbers will suffer. Do you care for them really? We pity them a little, which is admirable but unnecessary. They will do very well. Let them honour us and marry. Choose, and change." Hanethe tries to force herself into her flesh. Agdisdis persists—her own reluctance is magnified. She is exhausted, but her will is strong enough. Hanethe impels herself into her immediate presence—she bites down hard on her cheek and digs her nails into her palms. She feels she has pulled herself from deep water or from flying, to stand neck-deep in wet earth. She can hear pounding steps as Hadley brings Ferrand and the others running.

"Melly," she says. Her voice sounds strange to her own ears. The child is transfixed. Her eyes are locked on Dolkis, who is forcing her entire will upon her. She gives another choked cry. Hanethe puts out her hand towards Melly, but the air is thick as mud. It takes an eternity before Hanethe's hand reaches Melly's shoulder. Just before she connects Melly screams again, high and shrill: "Helver, Helver, Helver!"

Melly crumples to the ground. As they are plunged into darkness Hanethe sees a look of triumph on Dolkis's face. The white fire has been extinguished. All the yeya she has bound so carefully to the walls has been released, but Hanethe has no time for that now. Dolkis hisses again as one of Ferrand's men grabs her. Hanethe lets herself collapse on the ground next to Melly's fallen form.

Melly's heart has stopped. Hanethe looks with her yeyan eyes and sees Melly's spirit rising out of her body. It hangs in the air and looks at her for a moment, ashamed.

"No," Hanethe says. "Don't go—don't die—no." She reaches out with yeya and starts her heart again, forces air through her lungs. The spirit Melly traces a pattern with her finger, and looks perplexed when nothing happens—the dead have no yeya. Hanethe, who loses her parents and her brother and sisters to the plague, who bears a son to her uncle in dutiful necessity, who endures his childhood and leaves him and home without a tear, weeps now for Melly. Each tear burns its way down her cheek. She begins to find breath a labour, but continues to breathe for them both. "Come back," she wails.

The spirit Melly reaches out towards her, but she has already drifted east of her body. She shrugs and shakes her head helplessly. Hanethe lets go of the body and reaches for the spirit, but she knows that if she follows now she will die herself. For a long moment this seems like a marvellous answer to all her problems, but she dares not take the choice she stole from Agdisdis into death.

"It isn't your fault," she says, while Melly can still hear. "It was all my fault, nothing of yours. I was your teacher, and my teachings were not enough. I should not have said anything at all, nor put so much on you when you were so young. Now, you will grow neither older nor wiser. Let this life go, go East to the glowing lands of soul, and may the gods have what mercy upon you they may." She is weeping so much she is choking as she speaks. "You had such power, such potential. You were the only person ever who truly cared about me."

Melly's spirit wavers and moves east, against the slight breeze. Hanethe sees Agdisdis looming there like a great storm cloud, and withdraws back to her own body. She brings herself to her feet, stiffly, pain in every joint, welcoming this as once she drew the knife along her arms.

Ferrand is standing over her, Hadley beside him and some of his men behind. "Did Dolkis crack the yeya?" he asks.

Crack, thinks Hanethe, he speaks as if it were an egg or a plate. She nods. "She cracked the yeya and killed Melly," she says. Her voice falters as she says it.

"But she is breathing!" Ferrand says, alarmed. It was the first thing he checked after making sure Dolkis was secure. Hadley bends down and puts his head on Melly's chest.

"I was forcing heart and breath for her, but I could not bring her severed spirit back to her body. She is dead."

Ferrand looks down at his daughter's body, with Hadley still crouching above it. "Poor Melly. Poor little Melly. Taveth will never get over it," he says truthfully, for she never does.

Hanethe cannot seem to stop crying. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "She saved me from worse than breaking the yeya, she saved me from being sucked back into Agdisdis," she says.

"Poor brave child," Ferrand says. He picks up Melly's body and cradles it in his arms.

Hadley slips his hand into Hanethe's. He looks shaken. "It could have been me," he whispers, awed.

Hanethe wishes it had been and almost at once feels a vast distaste for herself, for the disdain she has for people, for thoughts she shares with Agdisdis about grubbers. She squeezes Hadley's hand.

Ferrand turns to where Dolkis stands in the clutch of the man of the nightwatch. "Take her to the manor. Take her to Gislain, who is sleeping in my study. Bind her, if Gislain will allow it, and set a constant watch on her." He looks directly at Dolkis. "It is a crime to kill a priest, and bad luck besides, or I would take my sword and kill you this instant for this. There will be a trial."

Dolkis hisses sneeringly. She manages to invest a lot of expression into what is only an exhalation. The man holding her grips her very tightly and drags her away towards the house.

"Timot and Gislain will see that she gets a Nemet court and no Nemet court will touch her," Hanethe says. "She was unquestionably doing the will of her goddess. It is Agdisdis who should pay for this."

"No vengeance on Dolkis or Agdisdis, even could we hurt the goddess, would give me back my daughter again. I don't want vengeance, I want to see Melly come hurtling down the path calling my name."

At this, Hanethe begins to cry so hard that for some time she cannot speak. Ferrand gives her his handkerchief, though he is weeping himself. Hadley timidly puts his arms around her.

"We cannot throw ourselves into her grave," Ferrand says after a while, when Hanethe seems a little calmer. "Can you do the yeya again?"

"I can," she says, blowing her nose. "But not now. I am drained and exhausted." She is tired beyond belief. She is leaning on Hadley's shoulder, and without his support she is not sure she could stand.

"Why haven't you slept?" he asks.

"I am afraid Agdisdis will take me into herself as I sleep," she says. "She tried the night after the burning."

"Come back to the manor and sleep in the kitchen with the yeyana," he suggests. "I will set those with the strongest yeya to watch over you."

She shakes her head. "No, Ferrand, I know you mean it kindly, but I daren't sleep. What has happened to Melly is proof enough that half-trained yeya is nothing to risk against the goddess. Put me to watch. Even without sleep, if I do no more yeya tonight I will be rested enough by morning to bring the fire again. This time I will bind it with an object that must be shattered to break it and I will give the object to Taveth to look after very carefully."

Ferrand draws breath to speak, when there is a crack and a flash of light as the part of the wall to the side of the gate collapses in a shower of stones and sparks. Ferrand drops Melly's body unceremoniously, draws his sword, and dashes forward.

"To me!" he calls. "Applekirk, to me!"

23

For a moment Ferrand stands alone in the breach of the wall, then the five men who were with him are at his back. The Pedmark soldiers rush over the fallen blocks of stone towards Ferrand. Most of the rest of the night-guard, all those close enough to hear the collapse of the wall, come up tardily to his support.

Hanethe stands open-mouthed. She is so tired, so bone weary, and so full of grief. The yeya that is ever ready to her hand has never seemed so far away. "Do something!" Hadley urges. He is like a stinging insect at her side, vibrating with urgency.

"What?" Hanethe asks.

"Get the wall back up like you did with the gate." Hadley says.

The gate had been one thing, one piece of metal that had been a gate so long it knew itself a gate. Hanethe focuses on the fallen blocks of masonry which are providing uneven footing for the fighters. Their swords clash on each other, like the clang of a demented forgework. The red plume of Galtis Pedmark's helm bobs up and down. It all looks like a lethal dance. Hanethe keeps being distracted by perspective. She could raise the blocks of masonry and hurl them back to the wall, pile them up in a loose jumble, and perhaps weld it all to the rest of the wall. But if they have brought the wall down once when it was unbroken, surely they could easily do it again. More Pedmarks are rushing through the gap. Defenders of Applekirk are falling. Something is needed, but she does not know what.

"Hanethe! Hanethe!" Hadley is shouting for her attention.

"Fixing the wall would be too hard and wouldn't work," she says. "I can't think what to do." One of her problems is always a certain lack of imagination. Along with her age this is what had prevented her from becoming a truly great worker of yeya in the Eastmarch and drew her on to the farther East.

Ferrand falls, going down on one knee. He still has his sword raised, but the man standing over him is bringing his sword down.

"Take us back!" Hadley screams. "Take us back to the manor before we all die here." He thrusts out his hands to Hanethe, his yeya so eager she can see it bursting out of him like lilac wings of flame.

Hanethe accepts his plan and his yeya, which twines with hers, and lifts all those belonging to Applekirk into the air. Ferrand rises up as the swordstroke falls, so it passes through his upper arm rather than down his shoulder to his heart. The others of the nightwatch feel themselves rising above the foe and struggle uselessly to get to them. The enemies gape in astonishment for a few moments, then the archers reach for their bows. Others prepare to throw their spears.

Galtis Pedmark, who is raised all his life on stories of how Applekirk belongs to him and he to it, whose favourite bedtime stories in distant Versan are his grandfather's tales of Applekirk, who has to dash away tears when he sees the place for the first time, finds himself rising along with the folk of Applekirk, leaving his men behind him. He bellows through the cacaphony, "Aim carefully! Don't throw unless you have a clear shot and can be sure not to hit me!"

The bodies of Applekirk's fallen, including Melly's slight body, rise up and bob along beside the living.

Hanethe clutches Hadley tight as they move through the air. They drift not much faster than a walking pace. The soldiers

on the ground can run much faster and encircle them, shooting when they have a clear target. Half a dozen of the night guard are sporting arrows when they reach the house and one has been killed outright by a spear. Ferrand is slumped over, unconscious. Hanethe is almost sure she would be able to tell if he were dead.

To Hanethe's dark-adapted eyes it is clear that the manor is closed tight. The windows are solid rock and the doors are barred from within. "The towers," Hadley says. Hanethe sees that despite everything there is a part of him delighted to be flying. He is nine years old, and he talks of this night all his life. When he is an old, old man in Belvede, a respected teacher of yeya, he still tells stories of the night he flew with Hanethe from the gates of Applekirk to the tower-top.

They land on the flat roof of the east tower. As soon as they are safely down, Hanethe moves towards Ferrand. Hadley stays beside her. "Keep him breathing and the blood flowing while I work," she says. It is part of the concentration she teaches the children early on. Hadley nods. She lets her awareness sink into Ferrand. His left arm has been clean-severed above the elbow—she can do nothing for it but stop the bleeding and encourage clean healing. His thigh wound is more immediately dangerous, blood pulsing from it, soaking his breeches. If they were not so tight he would be dead already. Hanethe does the small fiddly work with capillaries to mend the gash. There is a weakness in his leg after that, but he walks again, limping, once the wound is healed.

When she looks up from Ferrand, Hanethe sees that Galtis has surrendered to the guards, who have disarmed him. The door from inside the tower swings open, revealing Chayra, sword in hand with five men of her troop at her back. "Lady," one of the guards says. "We have a hostage."

She sees Ferrand. "Ferrand!" she cries, and flings herself on him.

"He will be well enough," Hanethe says. "Deal with Galtis."

Chayra weeps, ignoring her. "My husband!" she says. The five men who came up behind her, swords in their hands, look at Hanethe uncertainly.

Hanethe considers, and reaches out to Chayra. Consciousness would be no kindness to Ferrand now. He needs to restore his body with fresh-made blood. Someone must deal with Galtis and Chayra is the obvious person. As she touches Chayra's shoulder, she feels the presence of Agdisdis. Agdisdis has touched Chayra, contaminated her. Everything she has done out of doors has been subject to the goddess's influence and timing. This far west, Agdisdis should not have that much power, but she has been manipulating Chayra in her own sphere, marriage. Hanethe isn't sure how far that might extend. Hanethe glances up at the sky and sees nothing but the same overcast that has held all night. There is a faint paling towards the east, but if there are meltemi strands up there, they are invisible. It's not Chayra she needs anyway, it's Ferrand.

Hanethe stands up and faces the armed villagers. She needs to get them all inside as soon as she can. "We need to take Ferrand down and put him on a bed before he can deal with Galtis," she says.

Two of them lift Ferrand and carry him down the stairs. Chayra stumbles after them.

"Come inside," Hanethe says to Galtis.

"Who are you, and what is your right to treat for Applekirk?" he asks.

"I am Hanethe, who was once lord here." She hopes he will take her for Ferrand's mother, retired now, but he freezes a moment, recognising her name. Galtis looks at the remains of the nightwatch and Chayra's armsmen, but they do not challenge her statement.

"You?" he asks, amazed. "Hanethe?"

"You have heard of me?"

He says nothing—this tired old woman is not what he expected.

"From the priests of Agdisdis, maybe?" Hanethe asks. "Telling you to make sure to kill me?"

Galtis laughs and Hanethe looks at him enquiringly.

"Telling me the opposite, to make sure not to kill you but to capture you and have you sent back East as fast as possible." Galtis fingers his beard. "I was expecting you to look more—less—" he flounders. "More like something the Nemet would be afraid of and call a traitor and a wrongdoer. Fifty foot tall and shooting flame from your fingers, not the old woman I saw on the wall the first day."

"Oh, come inside," Hanethe says, weary of this.

Galtis looks suspicious. "Why?"

"Why not?" Hanethe looks at him coolly. "You'll have to come inside some time even if you're leaving right away, unless you want to jump off the tower."

She turns to one of the men who followed Chayra up the tower. "Get Timot," she says. "We need a priest." The man, a farmer in his everyday life, nods and goes down the stairs.

"Shall we take him in?" one of the others asks.

"Yes, bring him down," Hanethe says.

Two of them put their hands on Galtis's shoulders and escort him to the stairs. Hanethe follows them, Hadley at her side. Behind them troop down the rest of the surviving nightwatch. The upper room, originally Perry's, and for a little while Jankin's, is occupied by a family of twelve—five old grandparents, three parents, and four children, ranging in age from a fretful baby to about fifteen. They are all awake except two of the children and one of the old people, and are huddled fearfully in the corner furthest away from the stairs. They have lit a tallow candle which casts an uncertain flickering light over everything.

The people carrying Ferrand have put him down gently on the bed. Chayra is holding his remaining hand.

Hanethe puts her hand on Ferrand's forehead. He needs sleep and recovery time, but she cannot give it to him. She beckons Hadley to her. "Put your hand on his belly—breathe, concen-

trate, let the yeya flow like in circle work, and keep doing it," she says. He nods once. When Hanethe feels Hadley's yeyan strength reach Ferrand's head, she wakes him.

"Don't move," she says. "You're wounded, but you will recover."

"Where am I?" he asks, looking down at where his arm used to be. Chayra hugs him. There is a murmur of relief among the villagers.

"In the manor," Hanethe reassures him. "You're safe. We have Galtis prisoner here."

"Well done," Ferrand says, his voice very weak.

She decides not to let him know that it wasn't entirely deliberate. "We need to negotiate with him, for ransom or something."

"Let me deal with it," he says, strength coming back into his voice. He takes a breath and lets it out again in silence. They all wait anxiously as he orders his priorities. "Chayra? Get Taveth."

Chayra gets up and runs down the tower stairs.

Hanethe looks after her for a moment, then walks over to the streaks in the wall where the window once was. The yeyana are still hanging there. There is a fresh one made of corn and the flowers of the cornfield and a much older one of lavender and faded blue ribbon. The third Hanethe recognises from her childhood—it is a carved wooden lizard with crude eyes and mouth, hanging by a ribbon that must have been many times renewed with the generations. It hangs in her brother's room and she envies him it when she is a small child. Later, in a rare moment of sentimentality, she hangs it in this topmost tower room when her son Yann sleeps there.

"Set your hands on the yeyana," Hanethe says to Galtis.

"What are you asking me to swear?" Galtis asks warily. What Hanethe wants is to clear whatever long-distance influence Agdisdis may have on his mind, but it is natural that he thinks he is being asked to take an oath. There is no other normal reason for touching someone else's yeyana.

"That you won't attempt to hurt anyone in Applekirk in the next hour?" Ferrand suggests.

Galtis frowns, but puts one hand on the egg and the other on the corn. His eyes change. Hanethe can see clarity coming into his mind and the fog Agdisdis has set on him lifting. "I won't attempt to hurt anyone in Applekirk in the next hour unless they attack me," he says.

"Very good," Ferrand says. His voice is weak, but steady. Hadley stays bent over him, feeding him strength. "Now, it seems we may have some basis for negotiation. You have been captured. We should discuss ransom."

"I am the rightful lord of Applekirk," Galtis says, drawing himself up. The villagers in the room look at him, and then at Ferrand on the bed. "If you surrender to me, and if Hanethe agrees to go back to the East, I will let the rest of you live in peace."

"You are in our power, which seems to have slipped your mind," Ferrand says. "I suggest that you surrender your claim on the manor for you and all your descendants, swear an oath never to attack Applekirk again, and take your troops back to Versen."

Galtis looks furious. "That's out of the question," he says. "Let me go and I will withdraw with my soldiers outside the wall, where we were tonight before we brought it down."

Hanethe snorts.

"Forget the oath that binds your descendants, they wouldn't take any notice of it anyway," Ferrand says. "You can leave on condition you take your soldiers and head back to Versen, all of you swearing personally never to take up arms against Applekirk again."

"I will never surrender my claim!" Galtis says.

So much for negotiation, Hanethe thinks. She hesitates, looking at Ferrand. She does not want to kill Galtis without his agreement. Ferrand shakes his head at her.

"You won't give up your claim?" he asks quite gently, looking at Galtis.

"Applekirk was my grandfather's. He was driven out but he always intended to come back, as did my father."

"Nobody is disputing that," Ferrand says. "Likewise, I won't yield my claim. My ancestors have been lords here for four hundred and fifty years. How are we to reconcile this dilemma? We tried outside the gates, but you wouldn't listen to any suggestions. Now things have changed. You've breached the walls, but here you are, a prisoner. We could kill you, or we could imprison you, or we could send you back to Versen if you'd agree to go, but we won't let you go to make war on us."

Timot slips into the room and sits down on the bed beside Ferrand.

Galtis begins to say something, stutters a little, and stops. He starts again. "I swore to the Nemet I'd send Hanethe back."

Ferrand glances over at where Hanethe is standing, beside Galtis. "You've probably seen enough by now to know that Hanethe is out of your control," he says. "Leave Hanethe and Agdisdis to the Nemet. What do you want, Galtis Pedmark, and what will you take? Your grandfather was paid to leave."

"I don't want to be paid and I don't want to leave," Galtis says. "Your grandfather, or whatever, married a Pedmark heiress. I don't suppose you happen to have an eligible heiress of your own?"

The villagers laugh. Ferrand smiles. "That would be a neat solution, but my heir is a boy of six," he says. "I can't help you that way."

"I am not married, but my sweetmate and I have a daughter of seven," Galtis says tentatively.

"That's for the future," Ferrand says. "I'd not be displeased if my son made such an alliance. But now? I'm asking what you'd give in return for your life, if you won't go away. In a day or two Applekirk's goodlord, Lord Engleram, will be here and he will make a judgement in my favour, I am quite sure. I need only keep you prisoner until then. I suspect your men will be reluctant to fire upon the manor with you in here, even if they could. You are in some sense my cousin—I do not want to kill

you. Is there no compromise? I will keep a bargain I make with you, but it must be reasonable."

"Ferrand is an honourable man and the lord of the manor. The Nemet stands by his promises," Timot says. He looks a most reassuring priest, comfortably fat and very calm.

"If I were to pay you a ransom for my life, in gold..." Galtis says haltingly, "And if you in return were to give me Applekirk land and a house, a suitable house—if your son and my daughter were to be encouraged to consider marriage in the future, as you say—if you were to grant me a pension, then I would call off my troops before Lord Engleram gets here." He pauses, and adds deliberately, heavily, "Cousin."

"The house could be no bigger than the house of the reeve," Ferrand says at once. "And the amounts of gold of both the ransom and the pension would have to be negotiated carefully. But I see no reason why we should not agree to that in principle...cousin."

Galtis steps forward to the bed and clasps Ferrand's right arm, as cousins do. Timot then takes Ferrand's one hand in his right hand and Galtis's right hand in his left hand, and formally witnesses the agreement in principle between the cousins. Since they are cousins, though nobody there would wish to work out in what thin degree, there is no need for them to mingle blood. They spit on their hands and clap them together just as Taveth comes up the stairs.

She stands blinking in the doorway a moment, her hand on the stone pole the stairs wind around. Her hair is loose in a great snarl around her head. She has tossed an old frayed shawl of dark green wool over the loose linen smock she wears in bed. "My pardon for the interruption, but Chayra says you wanted me. At least, I think that's what she meant to say." What Chayra says to Taveth will not bear repeating, but at least a sense that Ferrand has asked for her has come through. Taveth leaves her in her room, where Chayra sleeps that night with Ranal and the children. Ranal manages to comfort her with his steady presence.

"My cousin Galtis will be staying with us for a little while, until he gets a house of his own built nearby. He needs to talk to the soldiers outside and tell them to stop attacking. We are making an agreement. Can you ask them to bring bread here for the blessing? I don't feel strong enough to go down. After that, Cousin Galtis, you should go to the front door to call your people off. I don't want to risk lowering the defences to open a window."

Galtis nods. Taveth sees what has happened to Ferrand, at least as far as his arm. It is not as much of a surprise to her as it is to others; she has seen older shadows of Ferrand that are one-armed. Her mouth opens, then she takes a deep breath, nods and goes back down the stairs towards the kitchen.

Hanethe sits down on the bed. "She doesn't know," she says to Ferrand, quietly.

"No," he agrees. He looks around the room. "Is there anywhere else people could go?" he asks. "I think I'm going to need this room for a little while. You're more likely to be able to sleep somewhere else."

"It's almost morning," Timot says. As a priest of Liakan he knows the sun is about to rise. "Go down to the kitchen and start helping with breakfast."

The family who had been sleeping in the tower room leave. Most of the armed men remain. Hadley sinks down beside Hanethe on the floor, leaning against her legs. He is almost asleep. Ferrand can stay awake for a little while without his help now. Galtis touches the yeyana again, setting them swinging.

Taveth comes back with a tray. She has put a bottle of Belvede wine and a jug of water on it as well as some flatbread.

"Blessings and peace in the name of Liakan," Timot says. "Be welcome to Applekirk, Galtis Pedmark." He breaks the bread and divides it as well as he can among all the company. Then he takes the wine, drinks a long draught directly from the bottle, and passes it to Galtis.

Taveth sits down beside Ferrand. "I couldn't find your cup," she says, embarrassed. "What happened?"

Ferrand looks at her, and takes the bottle from Galtis, and drinks. Then he hands the bottle to Hanethe. She drinks and passes the bottle on to one of the men standing around the wall. The bottle thus circulates among the witnesses. It becomes ever more likely that Galtis will honor the agreement he has made—he has given parole now that he cannot break, not without losing all honour, and Ferrand rightly judges that he is a most honourable man. Timot takes up the water, drinks, and passes it on.

"What happened is very long and very complicated, and I missed some of it because I was dying before Hanethe rescued me," Ferrand says. "I will tell you it all, but what you need to know urgently, the reason why I sent for you as soon as I could, the thing you couldn't go on not knowing—the really bad news—is that Melly is dead."

Taveth draws in one sharp breath and begins to cry. Ferrand holds her as well as he can with one arm. He is weeping too. Hanethe feels the water returning to her own eyes. Galtis looks at her in polite inquiry. She cannot stand, because Hadley is asleep against her legs. "Their daughter was killed in the yeyan battle before you broke through the wall," Hanethe says, though she cannot hold her voice steady.

"I'll go now and tell the soldiers to stop fighting," Galtis says gruffly. He turns to Timot politely. "Will you show me the way?"

"I'll show you," Taveth says through her tears, getting up. "This is my lifelode. I keep the house." The door opens for her as soon as she stands, as if it is eager to do anything for her.

"Don't you want to…" Galtis asks, gesturing vaguely.

"There'll be plenty of time for grief," Taveth says. "Let's stop the fighting before more mothers have need to learn that."

Ferrand closes his eyes. Hanethe sits very still, her mind full of Melly.

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Taveth leads Galtis downstairs and nods to the front door. Outside she sees a chill damp dawn. The sun is up, but not visible behind a thick layer of clouds. Pedmark soldiers with spears are prowling around the house.

"Listen!" Galtis calls. "I have made honourable peace with Applekirk. The fighting is over. You will all be paid and can go home."

A man steps forward and plunges his spear into the grass. Taveth flinches a little. "Is the traitor Hanethe to return with us?" he asks. His eyes seem to shine more than they should, and his voice is fast and lilting with the accent of the East.

"She is not in the bargain," Galtis says.

"Then we are soldiers of Agdisdis now!" the spearman says. "Yield up Hanethe to us, or we will destroy you."

Galtis is ready to argue, but Taveth closes the front door firmly and bars it from within.

24

For Taveth, who has never been east, there has never been anything uncanny about yeya. It is a small but useful part of everyday life. For Jankin at first it is all uncanny, and the very way everyone takes it for granted is the strangest thing of all. For Hanethe, yeya underlies the everyday world, often shining through. The urge to reach out for it is the strongest thing in her life, far outshining love, family, or even friendship. She hurts herself when she is young and bound by duty, because she cannot reach through to that deep underlying yeya. Now, even drained and exhausted with Hadley asleep against her legs, she knows she has only to reach out. She does not reach. She rests all day beside the resting Ferrand as they both begin to heal slowly.

The clepsie in the corner of the kitchen lets one drop after another fall into the bowl of water, measuring time in a straight line, time going evenly forward. Taveth, who fills it each morning, knows time is not like that, but she has no words to describe this. Time has its own shapes and patterns, loops and circlings. Taveth can see across time, but not reach into it nor ever turn it back. She half senses the patterns Melly draws, but she will have to live forever knowing that the last thing she says to Melly is "Try to be sensible, for goodness sake!" Time heals wounds, but it is as much torment as joy for Taveth to see Melly at five and seven and eight hurtling around corridors or sitting at the kitchen table, never older than that—Melly bobs along now, part of the flotsam of time, no longer free to move and shape her own currents as the now becomes the future. Melly was

her last baby, her youngest child. She loves Hodge, but he is Chayra's and Applekirk's, while Melly was hers for a little while. The pain of losing Melly will always be with Taveth. Tydsey helps and Hodge helps a great deal. Kevan and Perry do what they can, but Taveth never stops mourning for Melly.

Jankin's fascination is theoretical, the way time flows differently in different places. He would like to know why when you go west more time passes for you than at home, while when you go east less time passes. In practice, he takes each day as it comes.

For Hanethe, time has always been like the clepsie, one drip after another, her childhood, the plague, the cold-blooded conception of Yann, the long unendurable time of waiting through his childhood and youth, the time learning in the East, the time when she is Agdisdis, and then the time after. Even when she is Agdisdis time is linear, though very slow. It is hard for the gods to reach out of their time. Time presses on them with pressures of its own. For the gods, time happens too fast, it is inexorable and impossible to turn back. A day for them might be a month in Applekirk and decades in the farthest west, where they cannot go and remain divine. For the gods, time is one of the constraints, one of the bindings of the world.

Hanethe has still not slept by noon when the Pedmark soldiers break the courtyard wall again and rush in, trampling the vegetables and surrounding the well. The line of defence becomes the kitchen, but everyone can tell that things are desperate. Food becomes a real constraint. The house is full of unhappy claustrophobic people. The arrowslit windows and the top of the west tower are filled with Perry's archers, who shoot when they can.

The siege seems to everyone to last for a very long time. For Hodge, looking back later, the four days seem like months

that they stayed inside the walls, beating back sorties, not able to go out into the gardens for fear of arrows, and then at last confined to the walls of the house with the spearmen inside the wall. Taveth, organizing food for everyone, in fear for her family, does not count the days, except ahead, in terms of how long their food will last. There is no shortage of water, thank Mitra for the courtyard well, she thinks, and thank Gradior that the wall around the courtyard is as strong as the rest of the walls. Jankin makes notes each evening, and later Ferrand—consulting them because he loses track after he is wounded—writes down in his account book that it was four days.

Chayra takes Ranal into her workshop and tells him that when the siege is over she is leaving and taking Tydsey with her. "I can't take Hodge, he's Ferrand's heir," she says. "But Tydsey is mine."

"Where will you go?" Ranal asks.

"Potters can go anywhere," she says, spinning her wheel a little. "I have a lifelode that I can take with me."

"You should stay," Ranal says. "You're Ferrand's wife and he will need you."

"He doesn't need me. It's Taveth he needs. The first thing he said to me, the first thing, was to fetch her."

"Come to the yeyana," Ranal says. Chayra follows him and stands before a fresh corn doll tied with red ribbon and an old horseshoe that guard the window of the workshop.

"If you have to go, and if you have to take Tydsey, I'll come with you," Ranal says heavily. "I can farm anywhere there are farms."

Chayra looks at him, doubting. "For Tydsey?"

"For Tydsey and for you," he says, before the yeyana.

"You'd put me before Taveth?"

Ranal sighs and puts his arm around Chayra, drawing her towards him. "Taveth doesn't need me the way you do. She never has. We've been friends a long time, together a long time, and I love her. But it's Applekirk that is her lifelode, and Ferrand gave her Applekirk. She would have left me to come here, if need be. I made it easy by coming too. I can go with you the same way, if you really need to go. I'd rather you didn't, because I'm settled here and happy. Then there's the farm—whatever you think, Ferrand will need both of us more than ever. I'm going to miss Melly, and I'd rather not be missing Taveth and Ferrand and Perry and Kevan and Hodge too. But if you do need to go I'll come with you, because missing you and Tydsey would be worst of all."

"If you'd come with me, I don't need to go," Chayra says. "I have my workshop, you have your fields. And you're right, Ferrand will need us. We can stay here and help. But we stay here together."

They smile at each other, and in that moment the shape of the family changes—the bonds that make it up are reshaped with Chayra and Ranal's as strong as Ferrand and Taveth's. It is more stable in the long term, though it rocks Taveth when she first discovers it, after the shock of losing Melly, and all that came with Jankin.

"Of course we stay together," Ranal says, "Though if the soldiers break through and kill us all, none of this will matter.

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The siege weighs on peoples' minds all day long. "If the soldiers break through and kill us all, none of this will matter," they think.

Taveth cooks a huge rice porridge flavoured with onions and the last of the smoked duck she makes the autumn before. She keeps looking at the kitchen door, so uncharacteristically closed by the siege barrier.

Perry spends the morning in the arrowslit embrasure in the dining room, changing in the afternoon to the top of the west tower, where she finds a much better angle for shooting. She brings down some of the soldiers, which makes her feel better. She hates neither them nor Agdisdis, but she mourns for Melly. Kevan spends much of the afternoon up on the tower with her.

"Will you teach me to shoot?" he asks his sister.

"When all this is over I will," she says.

"Why not now when it could be of some use?" He peers down at the enemy, presently staying out of bowshot.

"Because we don't have enough arrows to risk wasting any," Perry says calmly. "There aren't that many of them. We might be able to get them all, or at least hold them off until Lord Engleram comes."

"Will he be bringing an army?" Kevan asks. Everyone has been wondering, not daring to ask. "Because if not, he's only a lord, and from west of here at that. It's not Galtis Pedmark we're fighting now, but Agdisdis. She might bring up more troops from the East any time."

"I don't know what he'll be bringing," Perry says, shaking her head. "But it's faster to come from the West than the East. Lord Engleram should be here soon."

Hodge wants to ask Ferrand the same question. He comes cautiously into the top room of the east tower, afraid he will disturb his father. The door opens with a creak and Hodge peeps around it. Ferrand is awake and alone. He has sent everyone away, even Hanethe and the children, who have been taking turns giving him healing yeya.

"Come in," he says to Hodge.

"How are you?" Hodge asks gravely. He waves a negligent hand at the door, which closes neatly.

"I'm getting better," Ferrand says. "I think I could stand now if I had to."

"How's your arm?" Hodge asks awkwardly. "Mother said maybe Hanethe could make it grow back."

Ferrand puts aside resignation and hopes wildly, but only for an instant. He shakes his head. "Chayra doesn't know much about yeya. Hanethe has already done everything she can. Regrowing an arm would take all the gods of healing singing in chorus. And Taveth says she has seen me one-armed and has always wondered how I would come to lose it."

"That's that, then," Hodge says.

"It would seem to be, yes," Ferrand agrees. It is riding he will miss most. Afterwards he can ride only slowly on quiet old horses. He will never again go hunting wild boar nor ride a horse with spirit. Nor will he put both his arms around a woman he loves. By force of will he refuses to be oppressed by the loss.

"I'm glad I don't have a talent like Taveth's—I'd hate it," Hodge says.

"It doesn't seem to make people happy," Ferrand agrees, thinking of Melly.

"Do you think Melly knew?" Hodge asks, coming farther into the room and sitting on the edge of the bed. "I know it doesn't make any difference, but it somehow seems so much worse if she did. Imagine dying, knowing you were going to. Imagine going out to die, knowing. She went off, bouncing the stewpan after her as if she was going to a treat."

Ferrand looks at Hodge affectionately. "I heard from Hanethe that Melly knew there were some places up ahead which were dangerous, where she could die, but she didn't know anything for sure. It isn't like knowing, I don't think, it's more like having an idea where you are in a dark room but still being surprised when you come to a corner."

"That's not quite so bad," Hodge says. "I thought she would have told me if she knew. I didn't see her all that much yesterday

because I was running messages and helping watch babies and she was making the plants fruit. But I saw her when we were eating and she didn't say anything special, or hug me goodbye or anything."

"She would have come and hugged us all goodbye if she'd known," Ferrand says, his voice breaking.

"Death is so strange. I always knew she'd go away to the East one day to learn yeya. It was obvious. I knew I'd miss her then, but even if she hadn't been here she'd have been somewhere, doing something, and she might have come back like Perry, or anyway, to visit. But now she's just gone, and it's so strange to think she's not in Margam or Belvede or anywhere at all," Hodge says. He wipes his eyes. "I know we weren't a bit alike, but I think in a way that helped us be friends."

"It often does," Ferrand says. "And in some ways you weren't alike because you grew up together and were defined in terms of your difference from each other. That often happens with brothers and sisters who are very close in age and there weren't two years between you two. This is going to be very hard for you and me and all the family, but it's going to be even harder for Taveth."

"Oh, I know," Hodge says. "I'll do whatever I can to help her. But I am going to miss Melly so much. That is, unless we're all going to die and Taveth and I won't have any time to miss her."

"Lord Engleram will be here soon. Perhaps even tomorrow," Ferrand says.

"That's what everyone keeps saying, but how will he end it when he gets here?"

"I'm hoping he's bringing an army, and that when he's relieved the siege he'll take Hanethe off west with him. I don't think we can take any more of the enmity of Agdisdis, even if it weren't for the soldiers breaking down the walls."

"Mother isn't speaking to Taveth," Hodge says. "She's been sending me to and fro with messages."

"Are you all right with that?" Ferrand asks.

"No…" Hodge says, and shrugs. "I hate it. But I want to help and I think she's calming down a bit. Jankin's keeping right out of her way, I told him to."

"I wish he'd never come," Ferrand says.

"It isn't his fault. It's Agdisdis. He would have been just something to laugh about otherwise, for Taveth as well as for Mother. Love is a very strange thing. I'm going to keep away from it." Hodge looks pensive.

"Don't you go being like Perry!"

"I know I'm the heir." Hodge turns and looks at Ferrand directly. "I'll marry for Applekirk. But I don't intend to mess about with lots of people and complications."

"You're still very young yet," Ferrand says, and smiles.

25

Late on the third night, Jankin comes up the east tower. Hanethe has been standing here all that day and night leaning on the parapet. In her grey clothes with her grey hair in the dim light she looks more than a little like the gargoyles that decorate almost all rooftops in Marakanda.

"Tell me about the East, about the gods, how it is for them?" Jankin asks.

She draws herself up and turns away from him.

"Tell me what it's like to be a god," Jankin repeats. It is after deepnight. In Marakanda the clocks would be striking three. Here there are no clocks, only the clepsie's incessant drip far off in the kitchen. The kitchen is dark, the fire banked. In Marakanda it is years in the future or months in the past—for a moment Jankin cannot remember which. There is nothing to see but the encircling tents and watchfires of the Pedmarks, some of them close inside the walls, but none of them in bowshot. Perry's shooting has kept them out of range. Now night has fallen and she is asleep. Gislain, who can see in the dark, has taken her place. There is no real need for watchers without bows or yeya nor for any better defence than the walls can make. If they are breached it is all over and there will be no warning. Jankin thinks of pointing this out, but does not, even though it means a disturbed night.

"Why should I tell you anything?" Hanethe hunches her shoulders. "You are a tool of Agdisdis. You have shattered this family."

"Do you think I don't know that?" Jankin says. "Do you think I want to know about being a god idly, for sport? We're fighting against a god. Those soldiers out there admit it. We should admit it and see what we can do to fight back. I want to know what they're like, really, in case it helps find a way to attack. You're the only one who knows. It is possible to oppose them. You did it. I did it when I put my finger on the bowl and the goddess disappeared."

"That was just smoke," Hanethe says, but it is true. Agdisdis needed her note to manifest and it was Jankin who realized that and stopped it. She turns and stares out over the watchfires. Perhaps it can do no harm to talk to him. At least it will keep her mind off Melly. "The gods are very powerful," she begins. "They have more yeya than you could imagine. But they're not necessarily very wise. What they have is personality, very strong personality. They're rendsome, very strongly themselves. You have seen iron filings rush to a magnet?" Jankin nods in the dark, then realises she is looking away, but she goes on regardless. "In the East, being rendsome is like that. People rush to the strong personality they most resemble."

Jankin tries to imagine this. "So they are archetypal people? And the gods are surrounded by people similar to them?" he asks. He pictures it working the way popularity works in the Academie, where the charismatic have cronies and followers. He always kept himself away from that kind of thing, being more interested in his studies.

"No," Hanethe grips the parapet tightly. "The gods *are* people similar to them. The gods have many bodies but one personality, drawn from the many. Bodies die, but the god lives forever. Think of a city of Agdisdis where everyone in that city is part of the goddess—is the goddess—their minds are one. When I was there, there was no Hanethe. Hanethe was a vagrant thought, an old memory. I was part of Agdisdis."

Jankin is fascinated. "But she cast you out?"

"If you were dithering between two alternatives...two women say, you being you..." Hạnethe gives him glance that is almost a smile. "Then after you made a decision, you could banish the side of you that argued for the second woman—do you see?"

"So it's as if you headed a political faction?" Jankin asks. He is trying to picture a god as a city and immediately thinks of the turbulent city-state politics of Marakanda. "Would others have rioted for you if you had stayed?"

"I'm not sure the analogies are helping," Hanethe says. The wind tugs at the corner of her cloak and she draws it more tightly around her shoulders. "Agdisdis was divided in her mind, I was divided in my mind. Then she was united and I was excluded."

"Do the gods do this all the time?" Jankin asks, his imagination racing. "Whenever someone becomes too unlike their core self?"

"Their imagination of their core self," Hanethe corrects. "It happens. Often they are reabsorbed later. Or they go on to do something else, or perhaps join some other god."

"So why did you leave? And why does she pursue you?"

"Those are two very different questions. I didn't know she would pursue me. I think I understand now, but it took the pursuit to make me see it." She stares out into the night. She has told all the children she has been teaching yeya to sleep, to rest themselves for the day to come. With the white fire barrier down they can bring in food from the village or even farther away. She has said she will coordinate this if they sleep. She is aware of Hadley dreaming in the tower below her. "There was a change coming. No, not a change, a time, a time of change. There aren't words. I can't think about this here!"

"Because thoughts move so slowly?" Jankin asks.

Hanethe shakes her head, although he is right. "Time bears on the gods, it clutches their feet, it constrains them. Time in the East is not like time here. There was a time coming—all the

gods knew it—a change-time. Such times happen, not regularly or even frequently, but the gods are accustomed to it. They are like a pressure on time and on the gods. Time is like a pan of water about to boil—now and then there will be a bubble. The gods know when, and can take that bubble, that change, and use it. When that happens we can change the world. Not can, *must*. We *must* change the world. That is the task laid on us as gods, our real duty. Everything else is just...ceremonial."

Jankin does not speak. Far away a dog barks and another answers it.

"This time of change was allotted to Agdisdis to use. The dispute in the mind of Agdisdis was what to do, what new thing to bring into the world. She wanted, most of her wanted anyway, to make women capable of conceiving children only in marriage."

Jankin gasps. He is not present when Hanethe tells the others this, and the idea horrifies him in its ramifications, which immediately present themselves to him. "That would change everything," he says.

"She said it was central to her sphere," Hanethe says. "Yet I found myself opposed, strongly opposed. When I was a young girl, after the Plague, I needed a child to be my heir, but I could not marry—to marry would have been to surrender the manor. There are other such cases." She thinks of Melly, the child of Ferrand and Taveth, who would never have been born.

"Would nobody bear a child for love again?" Jankin asks. Then, after a moment, "Not to mention that everyone who wanted children would have to marry. Besides, it seems to me rather in the province of Mitra, for children are growing things."

"Marriage is Agdisdis's province, not children. We argued whether there would be enough children. Fewer children would be born, but not sufficiently fewer as to be a problem." Hanethe shakes her head and looks into the East, which is growing paler with the coming of dawn.

"I think that's terrible."

"I opposed her, as I said."

"Well for whatever it's worth, I entirely support your opposition," Jankin says, though his mind has moved on and he is now thinking through the advantages, such as how wonderfully safe it would be for unmarried people to have sex freely. "But having opposed it, why did you have to leave?"

"If that had been all, I could have stayed in the East, not too far away. Perhaps in time I could have been drawn back to Agdisdis, either reconciled or not caring. What I did..." Hanethe turns away again. "I could not use the time of change myself before Agdisdis did. I was Agdisdis, you have to remember that. But I was also myself, Hanethe, the person with my history. Perhaps you could think of the gods as people who have hundreds of pasts but only one present? In that present, I acted separately. I took the change. She says I stole it. I thought I was preventing anyone from using it. But I took it, and I brought it west with me. It will be long before another time of change falls to Agdisdis, and by then she may have forgotten this plan. I thought I was only preventing her, but in her pursuit I have learned that I still hold the time of change within myself."

"If it's a time, how can you have taken it? A time comes and goes. It isn't something solid." Jankin tries to wrap his mind around the concept.

Hanethe smiles, looking out at the eastern sky. "Time is one thing after another, but this is a time for doing, it doesn't need to come in sequence. Think of it as an opportunity. I snatched it as it passed. I didn't really understand what I was doing, or maybe the parts of me that understood were other parts of the goddess. Your faction analogy isn't so far off after all. I wasn't alone in opposing her. I thought I was preventing her. I did not really know that I was holding the change, keeping it inside me. That's why she wants me back in the East. She desperately wants the change, and I have failed. I thought I had prevented her from using it, but I have only taken it and delayed her. Still,

I can keep it away from her if I keep going west. Agdisdis may want it, but she will not have it."

Jankin looks out at the watchfires. "She seems very determind to get it."

"Much more than I imagined," Hanethe says. "She is waiting, as close as she can be. If I die, she will take it from my spirit. I couldn't prevent her—souls without bodies can't use yeya." She remembers Melly the night before and bites her lip.

"You said the gods must use the times of change, but you didn't use this one. What happens if you don't use them?"

"Well, if we did not use any of them it would be as if we let the water boil—more and more bubbles, more and more change, but random, not directed. The world would change uncontrollably. But this one change shouldn't make much difference to anything." Hanethe is uncomfortable, trying to reassure herself.

"But why don't you use it?" Jankin asks.

Hanethe turns to him, surprised. "Use it? How? I said I was opposed to what she wanted."

"That isn't the only thing that could be done with it, is it?" Jankin is bouncing with excitement.

"No, I suppose not. It is a choice for change, not for any specific change," Hanethe says slowly. She crosses her arms under her breasts as if cradling a baby.

"So, use it for something else. Change the world. Make something new."

"Something new?" Hanethe looks at him and sees only the same good looking scholar who has caused so much trouble in Ferrand's family. His hair is straggling out of his bun and his leather clothes are dirty, but his eyes burn with enthusiasm.

"Yes! If it's possible to use it to make a change of that magnitude you could use it for anything. You could abolish hunger, or make everyone able to read, or reunite the Marisian Empire—or anything." He waves his arms. "Look, it's perfectly clear that Agdisdis isn't going to give up. Sooner or later, if you

don't use it, she's going to get it, get you. Those soldiers can't bring down the walls by themselves, but if they bring people with strong yeya they'll be able to. Do you think she doesn't have people like that somewhere in the Nemet? A hundred Dolkises? We're lucky it's so far and so difficult for her to get people here quickly, but that won't last. Sooner or later you'll have to sleep. If you use the change then she can't use it and she won't bother you any more."

"She might want vengeance. That's what I thought at first." Hanethe looks out and sees firelight glinting off a spear. Then she looks harder, then away, as she sees it is not moving. "The gods spend a lot of time on vengeance. She'd be less direct and more subtle about it though, and less urgent. I could probably stay here. But if I can leave here, I can keep the change. Doing anything at all this far west is a major effort for her and I could go farther west still." She smiles at him. "I could go with you to Marakanda."

"Well you *could*...," Jankin says, trying to picture her there. Then he laughs. "There are people there who would love to talk to you about the East. Lots of them. You could increase their knowledge a thousandfold."

"If I'd talk to them."

"Yes, if you would. You're talking to me now." Jankin smiles at her and hopes she will not think better of it. "You could teach. You could teach theory of yeya, how it works, rather than how to work it. There isn't enough yeya there for most people to do very much with it—people get just as tired as you are now after just lighting a candle. But you'd be amazingly popular. The Academie would give you rooms and a stipend, I'm sure they would." Jankin can picture it very easily. Strange as she is, she could fit in as faculty at the Academie. "They know nothing about yeya. Kalmar says '*As to the aeaean arts we shall have nothing more to say, for their study is profitless except in the East, where study itself is profitless. Such news as comes to us of them is second hand and contradictory.*'"

"Not quite profitless," Hanethe says. "But however well I stood with the Academie, how would it be with the Nemet? It is strong in the Westmarch, I hear."

"Well, yes, the Nemet is strong and they would make a fuss, definitely, but it would be obvious why. It is a fight many people in the Academie would relish. It's nonsense to say there can be no scholarship without the Nemet. It's time that idea was got rid of, and this is just the case for it. Besides, no matter how much wrangling there might be in Nemet courts, it is very far from the gods. Agdisdis herself could never reach you."

For a moment Jankin makes it seem almost tempting. "I could not live without yeya," Hanethe says. "It is my lifelode. Living without it would be like living without scholarship for you."

"So use the change," Jankin urges. "Use it for something good."

"I wanted to use it to get rid of plague," she says. Plague has always seemed to her the worst thing in the world. Melly's death is not pleasant, but it is infinitely better than the long drawn out agony of plague.

"So do that!" Jankin has never encountered plague, but what he has read about it horrifies him.

"No. The gods debated it. There were very good reasons against. It would upset the balance of the world. There would be too many people if some of them didn't get killed off once in a while. Mitra explained it. There has to be plague, to cull. Any change has to be considered, and even with due consideration there can be consequences nobody has expected."

"So what has change-time been used for in the past?" Jankin taps out a staccato rhythm unconsciously on the parapet.

Hanethe thinks back. "Different gods do things in their own sphere. I don't know all of them. There are things the gods did together in the beginning. Making the world in the first place, of course. Angling the yeya. Bringing people in. Then Velovis making the meltemi clouds, Damona making truth-light, Liakan inspiring poets. Making new gods, of course, but

the last time that happened was when Mitra and Velovis made Kora. The gods feel there are enough gods now."

"My thoughts have been too small scale," Jankin says. He stares out into the darkness, automatically counting the watch-fires as he thinks.

Hanethe does not have much imagination, but Jankin is full of it. She spends the next hour as day breaks bursting the bright bubbles of fancy he comes up with, one after another. She refuses to make the world round like a ball they way it is in some fairy tales, to set it in a crystal sphere, to provide a sun to light the night, to make a lake too large to see across with harbours on the shores and islands large enough to live on, to provide everyone with wings so they could fly, or to abolish hunger or poverty.

"All right," he says, at last. "A new god. A god of learning. A god who cares about scholarship."

"Didn't you listen to me telling you what the gods are?" she asks. "To get that you'd need not only a change-time but you would need to go into the East and gather like-minded people together. Most of the gods were created by their parent gods dividing at a change-time."

"That's why they are a family," Jankin says. "Oh, that's interesting. You really do have to come to Marakanda and start a fight with the Nemet, Hanethe, because that fact is so blasphemous and so interesting."

"I'd wither and die in Marakanda," Hanethe points out. "Besides, you wanted to become a god. You wouldn't be there to see it."

"Not me!" Jankin jumps backwards—it is fully light now, though the sun is not up, and she can see him plainly. He looks horrified. "I'm not right to be the pattern of such a god. I'm not disciplined enough, for a start. I thought if the god was there and was raensome—no, rendsome—then people would cluster to him? You can use the change to make him and the whole city full of people to be him would be attracted."

"In time, yes, but he would need a body to begin with and it would need to be in the East." Hanethe sighs. "You don't understand even after all I've said. You can't just use the change to make a god out of hope and air. Gods are people. Would you sacrifice yourself to become that god?"

"I would if it would help, but I don't believe it would," Jankin says. "I don't have strength of personality. I'm not stubborn. I'm too scattered, my tutors have always told me so."

Hanethe does smile now. "In any case, even if it were possible, going far enough east to use the change would put me close enough to Agdisdis that she'd absorb me again and use the change for her own purposes."

"There must be something you can do with it," Jankin says. "Just let me think."

A flight of birds rises from the black shadows of trees against the paling purple sky to the east. They rise up and spread themselves across the sky in a great arrow-point shape, pointing towards the tower where Jankin and Hanethe stand. It is bright enough to see Gislain and her bow on top of the other tower. The soldiers are clustered around their watchfires for a hot drink as the day begins. A thread of music rises from inside the tower, thin and cold, from Perry's old room at the top of the tower where Ferrand now lies recovering. Perry is playing a song she learns in Belvede and brings home to Applekirk. It is starkly beautiful, but it sounds to Jankin as cold and distant as the end of the world.

The sun rises, turning the eastern clouds to flame.

"I have watched through so many nights you wouldn't believe lately," Hanethe says, turning companionably to Jankin. "Every dawn is different."

"I think this is more different than most," Jankin says. "Look!"

The flame clouds have turned to deepest amethyst. The sun is coming up purple. The western sky is lilac. The clouds begin to swirl in a great violet spiral, and the centre of their

swirling is Hanethe. Lightning strikes, immediately in front of the tower, grounding itself in the flower bed beside the front door far below. Nobody doubts that it hit where it was aimed. Hanethe and Jankin feel the hair rise straight out all over their bodies. Hanethe drops the grey cloak, which looks mauve in this light.

The three priests who are in Applekirk feel themselves seized and begin all at once to speak with the voice of Damona. They turn instinctively to face the East, as if they were in Nemet.

Timot is asleep in the dining room. He turns east in his sleep and wakes speaking. Everyone on the lower floor of the manor can hear him, and some of those in the towers. Taveth comes running from the kitchen where she has been making bread for breakfast, flour on her hands all the way to her elbows. She is one of many who presses around to hear him. She looks into his face uneasily. His eyes are showing only whites.

Gislain is on the west tower. Her voice rises up and fills the air. Galtis Pedmark's spearmen hear her around their watchfires, where they freeze attentively. Hanethe and Jankin hear her, and so do Ferrand and Perry in the room below them. Hodge, sleeping with the other children at the base of the tower, wakens and pounds up the stairs, the doors opening before him, to stand at her side under the storm-swirled sky.

Strangest of all is Dolkis. Kevan and Hilden are guarding her in Ferrand's study. They are woken by Timot beginning to speak and find that Dolkis is speaking too, the voice of Damona forcing itself unheeding through her ruined throat. They bend over her to listen to the words that are barely more than a cracked whisper.

"Damona, daughter of Velovis, speaks! Hear ye the judgement the gods make! Hanethe has stolen from Agdisdis's choice, but the choice the goddess would have made is unseemly to our hearts divine." At the parapet Hanethe lets out a sigh at this.

"But unused choices make uneasy guests and may disturb this world that is our charge." Everyone is listening now,

wherever they are. In her workroom, Chayra clings tightly to Ranal.

"Therefore, Hanethe, we bid you take your choice and either use it now or yield it up."

"There is no more time," Jankin says. He takes Hanethe's hands. "Choose now."

Hanethe feels the change bursting out of her and she embraces it and with it, suddenly and unexpectedly, Jankin. She looks at his surprised face and laughs. "This is your choice too," she says. "You have the imagination. Guide it."

Holding Jankin tightly in her arms she leaps to the parapet. "I don't know how to choose!" he screams.

"I know how, you know what," she says. The sky is a swirling storm in a thousand shades of violet but they are in the eye of it, where everything is still, quiet, and poised upon the moment. They leap together from the tower and fall upwards into the purple sky. As they fall lightning rips open the sky ahead of them. Up and down have got confused somehow, Jankin thinks, or possibly have become east and west, for he is going forward in some direction which has no name. They fall up to where the sky is torn, to where the shredded clouds, edges glowing silver and amethyst, hang open for them. Hanethe guides the choice, the change, and Jankin chooses. Hodge, standing open mouthed on the west tower sees one figure only pass through the rent as the purple sky closes behind them like a curtain.

For a moment, as she makes the choice and falls—or rises—Hanethe sees the course her life would have taken without the Plague. She would never have been a goddess—she would have gone to Belvede and learned to use yeya and married there and died decades ago. Hanethe is astonished and awed that this other self ever could have been so happy. The act of choosing takes the Hanethe who had that life and joins the Hanethe of the Plague, unifying them in astonishment and awe.

What Jankin learns is stranger. In a sense, he learns in that instant all he learns through all time, everything he ever would

want to know. But his learning begins with the knowledge that when the gods made the world they deliberately tried to limit people like him, people who kept their childhood curiosity intact into their adult lives. If Jankin had been born farther West he would not have had enough will to be curious, but if farther East it would have turned to yeya. In response to the passionate "Why" of his soul, which guides his choice, he learns that the first gods wished to exclude such curiosity as his from the world because they felt it led inexorably to science. He grasps with an immediate enthusiasm that science is a strange concept, which leads him to believe that the gods were perhaps right. Yet he cannot see the harm they thought it would cause, nor do the gods know, for though the minds of the gods are open they can lose sight of concepts that are strange to them. That the gods came originally from another world is clear to Jankin, but that the gods he is joining come from his own world is even clearer.

He joins with Hanethe as two soap bubbles join and become one, as they choose and change, and fall up through the riven sky, exhilarated, curious, and still searching for answers.

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They walk back from the river, through the gateway built by the fabled Marisians in the walls they rebuilt themselves with Lord Engleram's help, after the siege.

Kevan comes back to the house for daymeal. Taveth fries the fish over the fire until the white flesh flakes freely from the bones. Latris makes flatbread with parsley, the way they made it in the East when she was a girl. A caravan is due soon, so Taveth is generous with the pepper and salt, sprinkling the fish on both sides as she turns them. Ferrand is dead and Hodge is lord of Applekirk. Ranal is dead too. His heart stops one day as he is hoisting a sheep onto his shoulders. After he dies, Chayra makes her great pot, an urn to hold his ashes. After that she leaves Applekirk and goes to live with Tydsey's growing family.

The children lay the table, running and calling to each other. Taveth smiles. She sees among them the shadows of other children, of Hodge, their father, and Ferrand, their grandfather, of Melly, who she still mourns, of Tydsey and Perry. Perry comes down, smelling the fish. Her name alone is known outside Applekirk—her woven blankets are widely sought and greatly prized. At home they are loved for their beauty and warmth but her family do not appreciate them as strangers do.

"Kevan's going to write down the story of what happened when Hanethe came home," Hodge says to Latris.

Latris is broad-faced and brown-skinned. She is wearing a red and white checked dress that bulges over her stomach. She is pregnant again. "Father will want a copy," she says, kissing Hodge affectionately. Galtis Pedmark lives in a fine house in

the village, growing older and frailer, acknowledged by Hodge as cousin as well as father-in-law.

"I didn't say I was making copies!" Kevan says, though he does, making three copies in his neat legal hand. One he gives to Galtis, one Taveth sends to the Academie at Marakanda, and one is kept in Applekirk. Ferrand's study is Hodge's now and the books are more varied. Hodge does not leave Applekirk to wander as his father did and he finds no treasure in the old stones, but he does not forget the conversations he had with Jankin.

"It won't be much of a story when we don't really know what happened in the end." Latris says.

"They became a new god," Hodge says. It is his theory and he believes it with an abiding faith. "News comes to us slowly here, but we'll hear something about them one of these days."

"I find it hard to believe they became a new god. They might have joined the gods," Kevan says. "We all saw what happened, but how can we hope to understand it?"

"They may come back from the East one day," Perry says. "Not in our time, but maybe in our grandchildren's, or great-grandchildren's. Hanethe came back once, she could come back again."

"All the more reason to write it down, so they'd be warned," Hodge says.

"What do you think, mother?" Latris asks Taveth. As always, Taveth is warmed by the word, though she is neither Latris's mother nor Hodge's.

"I don't think they'll come back," she says hesitantly. She sees Jankin sometimes, but seldom Hanethe, who left as little of herself as she could. "But they'd make a strange god, the pair of them. They were a strange pair."

"They were," Hodge agrees.

"The fish are done," Taveth says, tipping the last one onto the big plate Chayra made. "Let's eat."

They sit down and give the blessing and eat. The children fidget and tease each other, as Hodge used to fidget and tease.

The dining room is light now with the new sconces Hodge puts in, but the weapon rack still stands where it always has stood. All is as it always was in Applekirk, which after all is just a sleepy village in the Marches, where once the legendary Marisians built their furthest outpost, the star-tower and watch-tower that draw Jankin in his own time. The seasons come by in turn, the river runs over the stones, time unrolls in the way it always does. Ambule priests visit, stable priests live rooted in the grey stone nemet, the gods are far away. Crops grow, animals and people produce new generations, and things happen, oh, things happen that make those they happen to laugh aloud with delight. But these are little eddies in the great story of life, and everything is the same in a hundred years.

Lifelode Frequently Asked Questions

How did you come to have the idea for Lifelode?

I had been reading Frances and Joseph Gies *A Medieval Family*, about the Pastons, and a number of things in it struck me as interestingly different from the kind of generic medieval Europe you get in fantasy novels. For one thing there was the way people were always taking each other to court over things. Then there was a court case where a family who had once owned a manor and had sold it, claimed generations later that it had been usurped. The idea of the family at Applekirk grew from that. The unusual nature of the world came from a conversation with my husband about Magical Singularities, from which I immediately started to think about a fantasy instantiation of Vinge's Zones of Thought. There's a story illustrating relativity in which it happens at bicycle speeds rather than light speeds, and I thought it would be interesting to see how something like that worked if you had literal time zones. It's a variation on the theme of Vinge's. Also, I wanted to write a story that was small scale and domestic, with tons of magic mostly used for everyday life. I had the idea of Jankin coming in and disturbing everything, and that's where I started.

Why is it written in such an unusual way?

I tried to write it conventionally, in the past tense and one point of view at a time, and it kept going wrong. The only thing that worked for it was this strange mode, where everything happens at the same time and is organised thematically.

Did you make that up?

No, I borrowed it from Rumer Godden's *Fugue In Time* (1944) and *China Court* (1961) which are both stories about families in houses and written in the present tense just like this.

So the influences on this book are Vernor Vinge and Rumer Godden?

And Gies and Gies, yes, that's right.

You said you started with Jankin. What about Hanethe?

Hanethe kind of took over the story, because she has story nature. None of the others really did. I learned a lot about that writing this. I didn't want to have a large scale world changing plot, but you do what you have to do.

Why didn't you want a large scale plot?

You say there are no stories in happiness—only the fire burning, the bucket in the well, the wind in the gables, the crops ripening. You try to tell those stories and they fall in your hands into unpatterned incident. The shape of doing again what was done before is not story-shape, though you have tried and come close.

Stop and be quiet. Listen to the rustling. Stop looking for invasions and evil wizards. Until you can see the shapes that life makes ripening into stories worth your telling, the words that you say are only air, and neither life nor stories have the value your words say you set upon them.

So that didn't work out?

No, it really didn't. It turns out it's harder than it looks. Who knew?

But it looks as if the East is the most interesting place! Why does the story take place in Applekirk?

You have to have people. In the East, they're not really people. It was hard enough coping with Hanethe.

You've said all your books are SF. This one looks a lot like fantasy: is it?

No, it's also SF. I mean clearly it's fantasy, but it's SF in that I now how it all works and it has a consistent history of how it got to where it is from our world.

It... does?

Yes. Well, this is invisible in the actual story, but this is what happened. Some very powerful people from our world closed themselves into a pocket universe. To start with there was only the East, and it was all like that. You couldn't live on a human scale. People kept moving westward as soon as they could. The original people knew they'd maintain themselves across many bodies, as gods, but they didn't know what it would be like. The gods still have memories of this, but as none of the original bodies are alive any more a lot of it has been forgotten.

That sounds interesting. Are you going to write about the settlement and why the original people did what they did?

No. I have no plans to write anything else in this world.

Aww, why not?

You see, people *say* they like standalone novels, but actually they don't!

There's quite a bit about the East in the book, but what's it like in the far West, and Marakanda?

In the farthest West, people are like robots. They have no free will. In Marakanda they're more rigid than in Applekirk, but things are also more under human control. I wanted to show a culturally different part of the Marches, and having Jankin come from there worked for that.

So the further East you go the more free will you have?

Until you don't have any because you become part of a god. It's interestingly paradoxical.

What's with the time thing?

Space and time expand as you go West.

Is there any significance to using those directions?

No.

Where does the word "yeya" come from, and what does it mean? Why didn't you just call it magic?

I wanted a different word, because "magic" has connotations. I wanted something that sounded every day and domestic. "Yeya" comes from "Aeaean"—this is mentioned once in the text. Aeaea was the island where Circe lived in the Odyssey, and Aeaean was sometimes used to mean "sorcerous".

So it's Greek. Some other stuff sounds vaguely Greek too, why is that?

A lot of names are medieval English versions of Greek names. They did come from our world originally.

The change Hanethe wanted to make, so that you could only have children within marriage, is the way things work in the world of your earlier novels *The King's Peace* ***and so on. Is that deliberate?***

Oh yes.

But it seems like a good thing there, and a terrible one in Lifelode?

It's a very definite and sweeping change that makes the world really different. How you feel about it depends on where you're standing.

What did happen to Hanethe and Jankin afterwards?

I stopped the story where I stopped it because that was the right place to stop it. And I shall do the same with this FAQ.

Editor's Acknowledgments

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Peter B. Olson
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was born in Wales and moved to Montreal in 2002. She won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2002, the World Fantasy Award (for *Tooth and Claw*) in 2004 and the Prometheus Award (for *Ha'penny*) in 2007. Her previous novels are *The King's Peace* (2001), *The King's Name* (2002), *The Prize in the Game* (2003), *Tooth and Claw* (2004), *Farthing* (2006), *Ha'penny* (2007), and *Half a Crown* (2008). *Lifelode* (February 2009) is her eighth novel. The NESFA Press is also publishing a poetry chapbook *Sybils & Spaceships* in February 2009.

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Lifelode is what one might call domestic fantasy, set in a quiet farming community—but it's also about politics, God and religion, sexual mores, the make-up of a family, and how people change over time. There is magic, humor, and lots of good food.

—Sharyn November

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